



Abandoned

DIRTY SOULS MC BOOK 10

S  **SU**
L

EMMA CREED

ABANDONED SOUL

DIRTY SOULS MC BOOK 10

EMMA CREED

Abandoned Soul

Copyright 2023 by Emma Creed

All Rights Reserved

First Edition

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without written permission of the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, actual events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The use of any real company and/or product names is for literary effect only. All other trademarks and copyrights are the property of their respective owners.

Cover design by: Rebel Ink Co

Interior design by: Rebel Ink Co

Editing by: Yvette Mitchell

Proofreading By: Andrea Stafford

CONTENTS

[Author Note](#)

[Dirty Souls](#)

[The Story So Far](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Corrupt Cowboys](#)

[The Dirty Souls MC Series](#)

[His Captive](#)

[His Sacrifice](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

AUTHOR NOTE

*****Warning*****

Abandoned Soul and all books in the Dirty Souls Mc series are a work of fiction and contain adult content. Due to the nature of the series you should expect to come across various subject matter that some readers may find disturbing, and it is intended for readers 18+

Please contact the author if you have any questions.



'Bound not by blood but loyalty.

We live, we ride, and we die

by our own laws'

THE STORY SO FAR

The club are low after suffering the loss of Tac.

Tac was shocked when he found out that the affair he'd had with Thorne's sister, Suzie, twenty years ago had resulted in a son and has been raised by the club's rivals, the Bastards. It left Thorne feeling betrayed and while dealing with issues of his own, they had to work to repair their friendship.

After tragedy struck, seeking revenge and suffering the loss of Suzie, helped them mend. Tac was so determined to get his son, Hayden, back he was prepared to sacrifice everything. Even his life.

The Souls made sure every Bastard from Colorado died as a price. And it's only a matter of time before Chop, who was helping them, meets his end, too.

Thorne got his revenge and made sure Raphael Verretti could no longer hurt Riley and her son, by taking his life. And now, with fewer enemies surrounding them the Souls can finally focus on an internal situation that needs taking care of.

The club family continues to grow stronger and now, it's more important than ever to stay united. No matter what comes their way...



Waking up on mornings like this one reminds me why we keep fighting.

Staring out at the beautiful view in front of me with the smell of pine fresh after last night's rainfall, it's easy to forget how cruel the world can be.

That it can take just as much as it gives and that we are all at mercy to it.

"Beautiful day for a wedding, ain't it?" Jessie joins me out on my balcony with a shit-eating grin on his face. Maddy's been wanting to keep things traditional, so he stayed up here at the lodge with me last night.

He rests his arms on the balcony railings and looks out to appreciate the same perfect view that I am.

"You nervous?" I finish the last of my coffee and lean beside him.

"What I got to be nervous about? I'm about to make the most beautiful woman in the whole world my wife."

"Well, I can't argue with that. She's a fine one."

It's days like today that I miss my best friend more than ever. I can't help feeling like these moments belong to him.

Brian Donavon was a good man. The best of ‘em, in fact, and this son of his, is following right in his footsteps.

“I wish she was here,” when Jess turns to look at me, and I notice his eyes clutching at his tears, I know he’s talking about Hayley.

“I wish they were all here, son.” I squeeze his shoulder and think of all the people we’ve lost.

“You know, all these years my pa’s been gone, I’ve missed him, but I never felt like I didn’t have a...,” Jess cuts himself off before his emotions get the better of him.

“I get ya, and I’m honored by that.” I force the words off my tongue quickly before I succumb to that bullshit myself. “Now go get that suit on before that girl of yours changes her damn mind.”

Jessie huffs a laugh, then his face morphs into confusion when we hear the loud rev of an engine, and he spots something coming up the track.

“Don’t see many of them around here.” I look down at the bright red Kawasaki that pulls to a stop below us with the same questionable look Jessies got.

“Is that Ruckus?” He squints his eyes and looks further into the distance at the Harley that’s following up the track.

“Here we go...,” I sigh heavily when I figure out what’s going on here, then peering over the balcony at the girl covered neck to toe in leather, I smile at her when she takes off her helmet and shakes out her hair. I know exactly who this is, and she’s got trouble written all over her.

“Welcome,” I tip my chin to her, and when Ruckus skids to a stop, he jumps off his bike, looking like he wants to throttle her.

“What did I tell you about pushing over eighty?” He marches toward the girl, fuming. But she shows no fear and rolls her eyes at us before turning around to face him.

“Not my fault you got a slow-assed bike,” she tells him with her arms folded over her chest.

“It’s a fucking cruiser, Willow. You’re meant to fucking *cruise*.” Ruckus is ready to lose his damn mind. I’m guessing it’s been a long ride out from Long Beach.

“Well, I was done cruising.” She tells him, and somehow Ruckus manages to find some restraint, looking up at me and Jess and pulling together a tight smile.

“Prez. Jess,” he nods us a greeting. “You remember Willow?” The fact he’s talking through gritted teeth shows she’s put him through the wringer.

“It’s been a while,” Jess is smirking because we both know why she’s here. Cliff, the President of our Long Beach Charter, is having trouble keeping his sassy, little daughter in line. Long Beach is one hell of a party town, and he figures sending her out here is gonna learn her some manners. I got a few suspicions about how things are being run out there, and since I have my doubts, I’ve decided to be accommodating. I figure there are some women on this compound that could teach this little princess a thing or two.

“There’s a cabin made up for you. Number 12, the door will be open.” I tell the girl. “Ruckus, head down to the clubhouse. You look like you could use a drink. We’ll be there soon as we’re suited and booted.”

“Amen to fuckin’ that.” I watch him stare the girl down with a vicious glint in his eye as he passes her to get back on his bike.

Willow smiles up at us before putting her helmet back in place and taking off behind him.

“You know she’s gonna be trouble,” Jessie points out as we watch her speed off toward the cabins.

“Yeah, but trouble tends to fit in around here.” I turn around and head back inside to start getting ready.

It’s a few hours later when I get ready to leave the clubhouse. My boys are all dressed in their tuxedos, just like Maddy requested, and it’s surprising how well a bunch of rogues and reprobates can scrub up.

Ruckus seems to have calmed down a little, and I must remember to find some time and have a word in his ear before he leaves to head back.

“You better get yourself up to that barn. I’m gonna go get your bride,” I interrupt Jessie from the conversation he’s having with Troj and Nyx.

“Sure thing Prez,” he blows out a nervous breath and knocks back the rest of the whiskey in his glass.

“You got the rings?” I double-check with his best man, Troj.

“Shan practically sewed them into my pocket.” he taps his jacket and gives me a nod of reassurance.

“Then I’ll see ya there.” I head out the doors and get on my bike, making the short journey up the track to collect Maddy.

I was honored when she asked me to be the one who gives her away. I'm a strong believer these days that secrets are toxic, but there is one secret that I can take to my grave with a good conscience. Maddy Summers will never know who her real father is. That fucker doesn't deserve an ounce of space in that girl's beautiful mind. If she knew that Clunk, the old President of the Bastards MC *and* the man responsible for Hayley dying, was her father, it would destroy her. And I won't have that.

When I open the door to her and Jessie's cabin, I step into chaos. All the girls are flapping around out on the deck. Well, all of them except for Rogue, who's sitting on the couch with a bottle of Bud, flipping through a magazine.

"Sup, Prez?" she lifts her eyes off the page to nod at me.

"She out there?" I ask.

"Yep, they're doing the photos." Rolling her eyes, she slams the magazine on the table and stands up so the pretty, light-pink dress she's wearing falls over her Dr Martin boots.

"You're looking good, Rogue," I chuckle to myself.

"Shut your face." She shakes her head in disgust before stepping out onto the deck to join the others. I follow her out, and when the crowd of women disperses, leaving Maddy in the center of them, I stop dead in my tracks.

"Hey Prez," she smiles me that bright, beautiful smile. The one that brings hope to this club, even on its darkest of days.

"You look beautiful," I feel my heart start to swell in my chest when I take my spot beside her, where all the other girls gathered, so Paige can take a picture.

"Right, ladies. Nyx is waiting outside to take us to the barn. Move out," Marilyn claps her hands and starts herding

everyone out of the door. Ella kisses my cheek on the way out, and my baby granddaughter, Sophia, grips the lapels of my tux and tries to climb out of her mama's arms onto me.

“Not now, sweetie. Grampa will give you cuddles after the wedding,” Ella giggles, and the pout my granddaughter makes reminds me so much of her auntie Hayley's. I kiss her forehead and tickle her till she smiles again. Then Ella carries her out to join the others.

“I'll see you there,” Marilyn comes back inside to kiss her daughter, and holding her face in her hand, she stares at her proudly.

“See you there, Mom,” Maddy whispers and when Marilyn leaves, closing the door behind her, it's just me and her alone in the silence. “You ready for this?” I look at the girl who's changed so much in the few years I've known her. She's grown to be a strong, confident woman, and she's saved this club's ass on more than one occasion.

“Yes. I'm ready.” She nods back enthusiastically, the excitement practically bursting from her face.

“Well, that's a shame. I was gonna give you one last chance to back out and marry me instead.” I make her laugh, and when her eyes fix back on mine and I see them start brimming, I know something's coming.

“I know you hate all the sappy stuff, so I'll make it quick, but I'm saying it without you stopping me.” Taking my hand in hers, she squeezes it tight.

“You, Jimmer Carson, are a very special man. Not just to Jessie, and not just to me, but to this whole club.

There is no other man I would want to walk me down the aisle, and there's no one else I'd want waiting for me at the

end of it than the one you raised. I owe this moment, and every one I'm gonna get after it, to your daughter and I'm never gonna forget that." A tear streams down her cheek, and I feel the lump in my throat get bigger as my own eyes start to fill.

"Shall I tell you what the most perfect thing about you is, Maddy Summers?" I manage to get some words out of my own. "You have no idea what an amazing woman you are. Hayley saw that, and I guarantee she's seeing it right now. You deserve all the happiness in the world, and I know that boy is gonna give all he's got to make sure you get it."

Maddy reaches up and kisses my cheek.

"I'm gonna take care of him, you know." She whispers in that soft, assuring voice of hers.

"I don't got a shadow of a doubt on that, darlin'," I smile and hold my arm out to her.

"Now, let's get you to that wedding before my VP thinks you've found your senses and ditched him."



As Maddy walks up the aisle toward me, everything around her seems to blur. The long, white lace dress she's wearing clings tight to her perfect body, and as she smiles that bright, pretty smile at me, I can't help wondering how on earth I'm worthy of it. Before she came into my life, I never envisioned myself settling down. Now, everything I do is with her in mind. Her big, blue eyes peer up at me when she stands beside me and what I feel for her actually hurts.

"Glad you could make it." I grin back at her, and the tiny, little laugh she makes back, is the one she reserves especially for me.

Maddy wanted the real deal; so the priest, standing in front of us, says what he's got to say, and I listen. I mean every word I speak when I promise to be hers forever, and when I swear that only death will part us, I fucking mean that too. I've tried being without her, and it didn't work. This woman is the other half of me.

The service is much longer than I expected it to be, and when I finally get to kiss my bride, I lift Maddy Donavon off her feet and make sure the first one she gets as my wife is one she'll remember for a lifetime.

The whole room is cheering, there's chaos all around us and yet she's the only thing I focus on.

"I love you," she whispers when I eventually pull away from her, and the look of sheer, fucking joy on her face actually puts a tear in my eye.

"Congratulations," Prez slams me hard on the back before kissing Maddy's cheek, and we get separated when the rest of the club moves in to congratulate us, too.

After a military-organized photoshoot, we go to the clubhouse and head straight upstairs to the dining hall. Maddy and the girls have spent hours over the past few days getting the place ready, and they've really pulled it off. The place is unrecognizable and resembles all those lavish venue rooms I've been seeing in magazines for the past few months. To me, none of this really matters. I'd have married my girl in a junkyard. But, as she liked to constantly tell me, a girl only gets to be a bride once, and she's damn right about that.

We take our seats, and the caterers start bringing out the food. It's weird having a meal at the club that hasn't been cooked by Marilyn, but she's taking her role of mother of the bride very seriously. It's good to see her smiling again. Since we lost Tac, that sparkle she always had in her eyes has faded. The whole club seems to have had that black shadow that death brings cast over it, but looking around the room today, all I'm seeing are smiling faces. This is just what the club needs. A little hope.

It takes her the whole day and most of the evening to convince me, but Maddy manages to get a first dance out of me. I'll get torn apart by the boys for it later, but that's a small price to pay for seeing my girl happy.

As soon as it's over, I let the girls take over and crowd around Maddy, and I ruffle Dylan's hair as he passes me and races to join in.

"It's looking serious over here," I point out, straddling one of the chairs at the table where Nyx and Brax are sitting.

"Just wondering how long Ruckus is planning on sticking around," Brax tips his head across the room to where our club brother from Long Beach is sitting beside Willow. She's got her arms folded across her chest and an unimpressed look on her face, and he's still looking pissed as hell, but that ain't nothing new. No club brother ever wants to be put on babysitting duty, especially one with a mindset like his.

"Few days, Troj wants him to do some ring work with Storm before he leaves. Why? You got a problem with him?" I look at Brax, confused. I know we got our suspicions about how Long Beach is being run, but Ruckus is a good guy.

"I ain't liking the way he's looking at Gracie," Brax points out, cracking his knuckles as he watches Ruckus staring over at the girls.

"He knows she's claimed," I assure him.

"He ain't looking at her like he knows she's claimed." Brax snarls. "Maybe I need to step over there and remind him." When Brax goes to stand up, I place a firm hand on his shoulder and sit him back down.

"You heard what Prez said. We're playing nice. Something's going on in Long Beach, and we need to know what that is before we can figure out how to deal with it. Ruckus is a member we want on our side if the shit hits the fan. We don't want to piss him off." I tell him discreetly, taking a sip of champagne from my glass.

“Okay, Jess, but my tolerance for playing nice ends the second he touches my girl,” Brax warns.

“You think daddy’s little princess is gonna be trouble?” Nyx changes the subject.

“I got a plan to keep her grounded while she’s here.” I stare across the room toward Rogue. She looks a little odd wearing the pretty, pink dress that matches the ones all the other girls are wearing, and despite being pissed off about having to wear it, the fact she did proves she likes Maddy way more than she’d ever admit.

“Are you crazy? You want to put Rogue in charge of her. She’s here because she needs to stay out of trouble.” Brax sniggers, and when Grace moves across from the dance floor to join us, he pulls her onto his lap and narrows his eyes at Ruckus.

“Rogue has a way of getting shit out of people, and she was in regular contact with her when Shaniya was living in LA.” I remind them.

“They look kinda left out over there. Maybe we should go over and make them feel more at home?” Grace shifts to move but Brax holds her firm.

“You just stay right where you are.” He kisses her cheek and wraps her up a little tighter.

“If she’s gonna be here a while, we need to make her feel welcome,” Grace argues, but Brax shuts her up by grabbing her jaw in his hand and kissing the hell out of her mouth.

Looking around the room, you can see a division. The Utah and Nevada boys, who have ridden out to be here, are all mingling. But Ruckus remains by Willow’s side, and he almost seems wary of us all. Long Beach has been distancing

themselves for a while now, and it's becoming more and more obvious. That doesn't sit well with me, and for all we know, there could be other reasons why the girl's been sent here. She could be here to give feedback to them.

It's like Prez says, though, the only way to be a winner is to play the game. I eventually make my way around the room, and when I finally get back to the new Mrs. Donavon, she's got one of Squealer's twins in her arms.

"Suits you," I sneak up behind her and kiss her neck.

"You think?" The look she gives me over her shoulder is promising. I've been careful about approaching the subject with her since we got ourselves back together, but just lately I've seen glimmers of hope.

"I'm heading downstairs for a smoke. You need anything?" I check.

"No, I'm good here," she looks down at the baby boy's cute little face and then back up to me again.

"Yes," She smiles.

"Yes, what?" I laugh.

"My answer to what you're thinking, it's yes... Just give me a little more time, Jess."

"You mean it?" I frown back at her, checking I'm hearing her right.

"You're gonna be an amazing father one day." Her hand slides up to my cheek before she presses a kiss on my lips.

"And you're gonna make one hot-ass mama." I cover the baby's eyes with my hand and kiss her much harder. Then I leave the room for a smoke, feeling ten feet tall.

I head down the stairs, but instead of going into the barroom where everyone else is smoking, I decide it's too stuffy inside this tux, and I need to get some air.

It's dark outside now, and it makes me realize how fast the day's gone. All the planning and build-up that's gone into this, all over in just a few hours.

I'm just about to pull out my cigarettes when I hear a tiny noise come from the ground. I look down to see where it came from and have to scrub my hand over my eyes to check I'm seeing what I think I'm seeing.

There's a baby. A real fucking live baby, in a car seat, staring up at me like it's waiting for me to do something.

"Whatcha doing out here?" I crouch down to get a better look and scope my eyes around the yard to see who it's out here with. There's not a soul in sight. I'm surrounded by darkness.

"What the fuck?" I laugh to myself, wondering whose idea of a joke this is. It's got Squealer written all over it, but there's a cold bite in the air, and I don't think even he's stupid enough to leave a baby outside on its own. There's only a thin blanket covering it, the tiny thing looks cold, and I have no idea how long it's been out here. So, I do the only thing I can do, and lift up the car seat to carry it inside.



“You’re a natural,” Alex takes her little boy out of my arms and places him in his stroller beside his brother.

“I’m thinking it could become a possibility in the future,” I admit. Sure, the club’s been through some real bad stuff lately, but now that the Bastards are no longer a threat and Raphael Verretti is dead, things are looking up.

Jessie’s always saying how much Prez has changed since losing Hayley. He doesn’t take risks the way he used to. And just lately I’ve been thinking that making beautiful blonde-haired, blue-eyed babies with the man I love wouldn’t be all that bad.

“Really?” Alex pulls a wide smile on her face. The twins are only a few weeks old, and she seems to be taking motherhood in her stride. I know how nervous she was before the boys came along, but it turns out she had no reason to worry.

“Not yet, but definitely in a few years. I wanna focus on the business, get things running smoothly, and have some time with just me and Jess for a while. Who knows, maybe now things have quieted down, he might take me on a vacation.”

The music suddenly cuts out, the room falls silent, and me and Alex look at each other in confusion before I stand up and look in the same direction as everyone else. I stretch up to try to see over all the heads, but I'm not having any luck.

“What the *fuck* is that?” Prez breaks the silence, clearing a path as he steps through the crowd that's gathered, and when I see Jessie standing in front of us holding a baby in a car seat, my mouth drops open.

“I found it outside. Thought it might be someone's idea of a joke?” His smile turns nervous as it slowly dawns on him that his theory is wrong.

“Do you see anyone laughing?” Prez points out as I make my way toward my new husband and stare at the baby he's holding.

Call it a sixth sense, but I can already tell this is going to be bad.

Really bad.

“Whose is it?” I ask the obvious question, and when Jessie shakes his head back at me blankly, it confirms that I'm right. This is bad.

“Poor little thing,” Shaniya rushes forward and takes the car seat out of Jessie's hands. She places it on the table and smiles at the baby as she unbuckles it from its seat and lifts it out.

The whole room is still silent, staring at her as if she's about to de-activate a bomb.

“There's a note,” she passes it back to me while she coos over the child in her arms. I don't know if I'm supposed to be the one who reads it out or not, but I unfold the paper and read what's written aloud anyway.

“Congratulations.” That word I’ve been hearing all day suddenly sounds like a curse, especially when I notice the look on Jessie’s face.

“Maddy, can you check the CCTV software and see who dropped this off?”

“Sure.” I nod back at Prez, who’s already flipped into action mode, and as the whispers and chaos start to pick up around me, I start to feel dizzy.

My heart thuds in my chest, and a sick feeling creeps into my throat.

“I’ll have Tawk run to the cabin and get your laptop,” Jessie steps toward me and brushes his hands on either side of my arms like he can sense the panic building inside me, and all I can do is nod back at him.

“It’s a little girl,” Shaniya announces, and when I look over to the table where she’s standing, I see she already has the baby laid out on its blanket and is checking her over.

“I’ll head back home and pack up some things she might need.” Ella springs into action despite looking a little daunted, but at least she’s doing something.

“Mads?” Jessie’s voice pulls my attention back to him, and when he looks at me with his brows knitted together, I swallow all my fear and ask him the question.

“Is that note for you?” My voice comes out shaky, and when Jessie raises his lips into a wide smile, I wonder what the hell he’s got to look happy about.

“There ain’t much in this world you can be sure of, darlin’. But with this, I can hand on my heart promise. That note ain’t for me,” he shakes his head and pulls me closer so our lips

almost touch, and when he presses his forehead into mine, I feel myself breathe again.

“I know. I just had to ask.” I suddenly feel bad for the few seconds of doubt I had. Jessie is as loyal as they come. He’s proved how much I mean to him time and time again.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“No sorry needed, darlin’. You’re just lucky you got that dance in when you did, ‘cause right now we got to find out who this little girl belongs to.”

Tawk returns with my laptop about ten minutes later, and while Shaniya and Alex fuss around our unexpected wedding guest, I quickly log into the security system and go through the latest footage.

“There,” Jessie’s eagle eye catches the car as it pulls up at the front of the clubhouse, and when I see the woman with long, blonde hair in a short skirt and a fur coat, open the back door and take out the car seat I already know exactly who it is. She strides up to the clubhouse door with such confidence, and without a single show of remorse or hurt, she places the car seat on the floor, looks up at the camera, and holds up her middle finger.

“Mel.” Jessie drops his head into his hands when, after one final smile at the camera, she gets back into her car and skids off.

“Shit!” Prez sits down in a chair and lets out a long, deflated breath. Everyone here is gathered around the table where we’re sitting, waiting for their next instruction.

“Storm, call the Doc. We need him to check her over properly and try to estimate her age. Ella, darlin’, go talk to

Paige and ask if she has any contact details for Mel.” The old man looks tired as he rubs his fingers against his temple.

“Here was me thinking it would be dull here.” The girl who came here from Long Beach sniggers, but her snide comment doesn’t get a response. Everyone is too much in shock.

“We need someone to take care of her tonight. It’s late. We’ve all been drinking. This is something that’s gonna have to be figured out in the morning.” Prez speaks up again.

“We could...”

“No.” Shaniya cuts me off. “It’s your wedding night. We’ll take her.” She looks up at Troj, who’s every bit as shocked as everyone else in the room.

“Troj?” Prez looks to him for confirmation.

“Yeah, sure, I guess we’re taking her home.” He stares at the baby like she’s something to be afraid of, as Shaniya scoops her back into her arms.

“Settled,” she smiles at her husband. “We better get her home. We have enough supplies from Ella to get us through the night, and I’ll bet she’s hungry.” She kisses me and Jessie on our cheeks and heads for the door, with Troj following behind her, carrying all the supplies and the car seat.

When I take a look around the room at all the couples and single brothers this little girl could belong to, I can’t help wondering which one of their lives is about to change.



I sit and wait for the room to fill, clasp the gavel in my fist. Being a leader isn't easy, especially on days like this one. I can sense the shit, this is gonna cause, hanging over my club like a storm waiting to dump. There's no good outcome for a kid without a mother, especially not in a place like this.

"Prez," Jessie nods his head at me as he takes the VP spot beside me. He throws a brown envelope in front of me, and I stare back at him, confused.

"Maddy made a roster," he makes that pathetic grin he does whenever he refers to his old lady. "She's already done what you asked and ordered the DNA testing kits."

"If this is what she spent her wedding night working on, you're doing something wrong, son," I snigger at him.

"Do you want me to tell you what I was doing to her while she was putting that together? Let's just say while she was workin' that clever little head of hers, I was workin'..."

"Got it." I cut him short. Maddy's like a fucking daughter to me.

"So what's the plan? We gonna track down Mel?" Jessie places a smoke between his lips and picks up my Zippo from

the table to light it. Sitting back in his chair, he releases a long, steady stream of smoke and waits to hear what I have planned.

“I figure the first thing we do is find out whose problem this is. Then we let them decide where it goes from there.” I shrug because right now, that’s all I got.

“You know this is gonna cause a whole lot of shit, don’t ya? Some in the running are settled with old ladies,” Jessie points out the fucking obvious.

“That’s why I’m gonna say that everyone gets tested. We can’t have anyone scared to speak up because they’re worried it’s gonna get them in trouble at home. If this kid belongs to a Soul, he’ll take responsibility for it.”

Troj is the next one through the door. He takes the seat to my right and rubs his hand over his eyes.

“Tough night?” Jessie smirks.

“Kids don’t fucking sleep,” he growls. “That little thing had me up half the night. I swear Shaniya didn’t sleep at all.”

“Well, thanks to Mad’s roster you’ll get your sleep tonight,” Jess assures him.

“What did the Doc say about the kid? I was out running when he stopped by to check her over this morning?” Troj asks.

“Morning mother fuckers.” Squealer interrupts, with his brother following in close behind and nodding us a greeting. Screwy spent years at this club without speaking a word to anyone. Since meeting his old lady, he’s found his voice, but he still only uses it when he has to.

“You look tired, Trojey,” Squealer shakes Troj’s shoulders roughly before he takes his seat. “You want to try having two

little squawkers keeping you up at night.” Squeal more than makes up for his brother’s silence, and I figure he’s pretty upbeat for someone who’s in the running.

“Imagine having three.” Troj hits back at him, and suddenly all that confidence falls off Squealer’s face.

Grimm’s the next brother to enter church. He takes his seat silently and stares at the table. Skid and Thorne arrive together, and their eyes shift around the room to the empty space where Tac used to sit as they take their own chairs.

“I called in the Prospects, too,” Skid assures me. I text him earlier to round everyone up. Anyone who potentially dipped into Mel over the past year needs to be present.

I’m covering all bases here.

Nyx bursts through the doors and takes his seat beside Jessie.

“You look flustered.” I stare down my nose at my son-in-law. I swear to fucking Satan, if he’s responsible for this, I’ll break every single bone in his body. It would crush Ella if he’d done the dirty on her.

“Thought I was gonna be late... Ell’s got a hangover, so I was on breakfast duty,” he smiles me that poster boy smile. “Where’s Brax?”

“Here.” A low voice comes from the door, and when I look up and see Brax heading for his seat, I can sense the tension in him straight away. He looks like he hasn’t slept, his eyes are bloodshot, and his fists are tensed up like they’re liable to smash into something. We wait a few more minutes to get started, and when Tawk, Hayden and Storm finally arrive, Storm closes the door, and I begin.

“As all of you are aware, we had a special delivery last night. The note suggests that the baby belongs to one of us.” I use the word *us* because I’m in the running, too. “I’m not gonna sit here and ask which of you could be responsible. A lot of men have got a lot at stake. The best way to do this is for everyone to get tested.” I watch for everyone’s reaction, and a lot of faces lose their color.

Brax’s eyes shift nervously. I can’t recall ever seeing him look so fucking scared. If this kid’s his, it would mean it was conceived while him and Grace were together, and I can’t see that girl being very forgiving of his dirty work.

“How old’s the kid?” Troj asks the question that went unanswered earlier.

“Doc predicts about six months,” I answer, and I can tell from the way Troj closes his eyes that he just got put in the race.

“Mads has ordered tests to come, but in the meantime, we gotta figure out how to deal with this as a club. She’s also put together a roster...” I pull it out from the envelope and glance over it.

“Wait, we got newborn twins. My old lady’s pretty understanding, but I don’t think she’s gonna be cool with adding another to the mix.” Squeal points out.

“Then you better hope that kid ain’t yours,” Nyx chuckles across the table at him, and Squealer throws him a stern look back.

“Maddy has obviously taken that into consideration. You’re not on the roster.” I tell him after checking. “Nyx, you and Ella are also exempt, and it looks like Grimm and Rogue are, too.”

“How come they get let off the hook? They haven’t got kids?” Thorne pipes up. “We’ve got Gabriel, and Riley’s puking night and day right now.”

“I didn’t make the roster. You’ll have to speak to Maddy. But I’m sure we can all work together for a few days until we’ve rushed these tests through. Once we know who the father of the kid is, we’ll work from there.”

“And we’re all being tested. Prospects, too?” Tawk speaks up from the back.

“Everyone in this room,” I assure him.

“What if we didn’t do Mel?” Tawk asks.

“*Everyone’s* done, Mel,” Jessie looks back over his shoulder at him. “She’s part of the initiation process.”

I note how Tawk looks back down at his feet, and I can’t figure out if it’s out of shame or worry.

“Who’s next on the roster?” Screwy clears his throat to ask.

“That will be…” I check the list in front of me.

“Brax and Grace.”

“Wait, what?” Brax looks up from the spot on the table that he’s been staring at.

“Yep, you’re taking over from Troj here,” I crack him a smile.

“This fucking sucks. I got a fucking run to map out and a bunch of work up at the cabin to get on with,” he complains.

“Then you better hope your old lady is good with babies,” I tell him, having little sympathy. He’s lucky he’s got a woman to help him.

“Grace is great with Dylan and Sophia. She’s gonna love it,” Nyx sounds chirpy, and Brax side glances at his brother with a cold stare.

“We all got to do our bit, brother,” Jessie points out.

“Yeah, and when are you doing your bit?” Brax snaps back, and Jessie takes the sheet out of my hand and studies it.

“Wednesday afternoon, right after Tawk does the morning shift.”

“Wait. I can’t take a shift. I haven’t got an old lady. I don’t know how to take care of a baby.”

“Figure it out.” I slam down the gavel.

We could talk about this shit all day. Nothing’s gonna be resolved until those results come back. I can’t even think about what I’ll do if I’m the fucking father of the kid. I’m too old to start over again. I got no one to help me out, either. Sure, I screw around with Haven more often than the others, but she sure ain’t mother material.

I watch my brothers stand up to leave, and I call one of them back.

“Nyx,” I hold back my son-in-law, and he taps Troj on the shoulder at the door and hangs back. I wait for him to retake his seat at the table before I speak.

“I want you to give me an honest answer to the question I’m gonna ask.”

“Shoot,” he lifts his chin at me with a touch of arrogance.

“Did you fuck Mel?”

“Like VP said, we’ve all fucked Mel,” he answers me back.

“Now’s not the time to be getting fucking smart. You know what I’m asking.”

“Prez, I haven’t looked at another woman since I fell for your daughter. I like my balls right where they are,” he assures me.

“That’s good, Nyx, because I’ll warn you. If those results were to come back and pin you down as the father, it wouldn’t be just your balls that got misplaced.”

“I know that, and you should know me by now, Prez. Your daughter owns me heart and fucking soul. I wouldn’t do a thing to jeopardize that.”

The kid’s being serious now, serious enough for me to trust what he’s saying.

“Get out of here,” I dismiss the soft cunt before he grows a fucking pussy himself. I got to owe it to the kid, though. He makes my girl happy, and so long as he keeps that up, me and him won’t have a problem.



I leave church with an unnerving pain in my stomach. The Doc puts the kid at around six months old, and that puts me in the running to be it's father.

Her father.

I can't think what that might mean for me and Shaniya or about what I'm gonna have to tell her when I get home. It feels as though life keeps loading its fuckin' gun for the two of us. I'm starting to wonder if we'll ever catch a break.

Hell, we deserve one.

I follow the others out into the yard, noting the somber atmosphere as everyone goes about their business. Before I get on my bike, I take out my cell phone and dial another possible suspect.

"Baby bro," Autumn answers on the third ring. There's music and voices in the background, and I try to blank them out so I can get to my point.

"We've got a situation here at the club."

"You need me to ride up?" I hear the spike of excitement in his voice. Autumn will never be shy of getting his hands

dirty. Once a Soul, always a Soul. Unless you're a traitor... and then you're dead.

“No, not unless you think it might be your problem?”

“My problem? Jesus Troj, I'm practically a fucking priest these days,” he chuckles back at me.

“Maybe, but from what I remember, you weren't acting all that holy back when we had to kick some Albanian ass last year.” I remind him, nodding my head at Jessie as he passes me to step inside the clubhouse.

“Bro, I don't have a fucking clue what you're talking about.” Autumn sounds confused, so I get straight to the point.

“A baby got dropped off at the club last night, a six-month-old baby that apparently belongs to one of us. You remember Mel?”

“Mel... “ he lets the name tick over in his head. Christ knows how many women he's scored. “... I ain't so good with names. Are her tits real or fake?”

“Autumn, this is serious. Could the kid be yours or not?” I'm starting to get frustrated. The thought of having to go home and possibly shatter my wife's fucking heart because I've fathered another woman's child is eating me up. This is not how it was supposed to be for us.

“Listen,” Autumn lowers his voice to a rasp. “You can't be calling me up asking if I knocked up some bitch over a year ago. There have been a lot of fucking times, Troj, I'm asking you to be more specific!” It's not very often a man gets to hear fear come out of Autumn. I'd get a kick out of it if I wasn't so petrified myself.

“Mel, club whore, blonde. Tattoo of a dragon's face on her pussy.” I make it as clear as I can get it for him.

“Oh yeah, I remember.” he laughs. “The one that looked as if it would set fire to your dick before it swallowed it.”

“Did you fuck her?” I try to get him to the point.

“Oh, I fucked her,” he laughs as if he’s relaying a memory in his head.

“So you could be the father?” I close my eyes. Shit just keeps piling up today.

“Not the way I did it. The dragon thing freaked me the fuck out. I decided to take a by-pass through the back route, if you know what I mean.”

“I know what you mean, Aut. Look, I got to go. Shit’s a little crazy around here. “

“Sure thing. Good luck with the whole baby mess. Let me know if I’m an uncle,” I swear if the sarcastic prick wasn’t over three hundred miles away, I’d punch him straight in his fucking throat.

Hanging up the phone, I tuck it into my cut and kick-start my bike. Then I start the journey up to my cabin. Searching for the kindest words I can use to ruin my beautiful wife’s day.

I find Shaniya in the rocking chair, out on the porch. She’s got the baby in her arms, and her face cringes when she hears the rumble from my engine. I cut it out and grit my teeth back, making her a silent apology. I hope I haven’t woken her up. We were up half the night, but luckily Shaniya seemed to know all the right things to do. Caring is something that comes to her naturally.

It feels criminal that I haven’t knocked her up yet, but I got all faith in it happening. Things have been crazy for us since we met. Shaniya’s been through unimaginable things, and she deserves everything and more.

“How did it go?” she whispers, unable to take her eyes off the tiny bundle in her arms. Ella supplied some things she thought the baby might need last night, and I notice Shaniya’s changed the baby into a different outfit from the one she was wearing when I left an hour ago.

“Prez spoke to the Doc, who came out here this morning,” I start, trying my best to figure out how I’m going to tell Shaniya that the baby she’s holding could very well be mine.

“Is she ok? He never said anything when he was here, but I didn’t like the way he kept checking her glands. Do you think she’s sick?” Shaniya’s eyes widen with concern.

“No, nothing like that,” I assure her quickly. “Doc reckons she’s about six months old.”

“And clever. She giggled at me earlier. I’ll try to make her do it again when she wakes up. It’s so cute,”

“Shaniya...” I almost choke on the fucking words I need to get out.

“I gotta tell you something, something that might hurt you. But before I do. I need you to know that I would never intentionally...”

“She could be yours,” Shaniya interrupts me, and a warm smile lifts onto her lips that I wasn’t expecting.

Now I am speechless. The whole time Prez was talking in church, I was thinking about how I could tell her, and it seems she already knows.

“I’m sorry.”

That’s it. That’s what I come out with. I’m fucking sorry.

It sucks.

“Why are you sorry? You can’t change the past.” She looks up at me, her bright, blue pupils melting my soul. This girl’s been through hell, and yet there ain’t a hint of bitterness inside her. She’s beyond fucking strong. She’s indestructible.

“That time when you went to Long Beach, I was a mess. I thought I’d lost you forever, and it turned out to be a dark time for me. The darkest.” I admit.

“You don’t have to explain yourself. And if this little girl is a product of that dark time for you, then you should have no regrets. She’s beautiful.” The way Shaniya smiles fondly at the sleeping girl splits my heart in two. She was born to be a mother. She has far too much love in her heart for me to keep all to myself.

“Mads ordered DNA kits through an express courier. She’s done a roster for taking care of this little one.” I slide my finger gently over the little girl’s arm. She’s so fucking tiny I’m scared I’ll hurt her.

“We could take care of her, Troj. We don’t need a roster. I can manage.”

“Don’t worry, Rogue and Grimm ain’t on the schedule,” When I smile up at her, and she laughs, it makes the baby wriggle, and when her eyes flash open, they immediately lock with mine. They are a misty green colour and real fucking pretty. She blinks at me a few times, and then her little mouth starts to move like she’s seeking something.

“She’s hungry. Here, take her while I make her a bottle.” Shaniya doesn’t give me the chance to protest, carefully passing the child into my arms and getting out of the chair.

“Troj, I meant what I said. We can take care of her. She’s defenseless and innocent. And if she’s yours, I’ll love her like

a mother should love a child.” Shaniya disappears back inside the cabin before I can tell her how incredible she is. Leaving us alone on the porch with just the sound of the birds and the wind in the trees.

“Don’t fucking cry on me, kid,” I offer her tiny hand my finger to play with. She takes it and squeezes it tight in her fist. “Those are some fighting hands right there.” I laugh. If she is mine, I’ll teach her how to throw a punch before she learns to walk.

“I don’t know how your mama treated you or if you’re feeling scared being around all these strangers, but you’re here now, and you’re safe.” I tell her quietly, and she rewards me with an adorable half-smile. One that looks like it could turn into a hungry scream any second.

“And if you are mine...” I whisper, making sure Shaniya can’t hear me. “...you sure as hell just fell on your feet, kid. I got the most caring, loving woman on this planet, and she was put on this earth to be a mama.”



“Her formula is all in the bag. She’s taking feeds every four hours. You’ll know when she’s hungry, she makes this adorable noise.” Shaniya hands over the baby reluctantly, and I take the handle of the car seat and make sure it’s secure in the back seat of my car.

“I do know how to look after a baby. I’ve had plenty of practice with Dylan and Sophia.” I snap, before checking the little girl for any resemblances. I feel sorry for the poor little thing. But that doesn’t make me wish she wasn’t here.

“Have fun, and if it gets too much, just call me, and I’ll take her back.” Shaniya fusses with her, making it impossible for me to close the door and get going. I smile at her politely, but on the inside, I’m raging. Brax texted me about an hour ago, saying it was our turn to have the kid. He’s been pretty much AWOL since Mel dropped off her little bombshell last night. Which only makes me worry that he’s got something to feel guilty about.

For all we know, the skank could be lying about who the father is. It might not even be a Soul. But there are certain couples here that this baby could make a big impact on. Squealer and Screwy were both single when the baby would have been conceived. I’m pretty sure the dates tie in Troj, too.

If she's one of theirs, it wouldn't be their fault. They were single men doing what single men do. Accidents happen all the time.

But Brax was with me. We were living together, and the thought of him cheating on me makes me feel sick.

Shaniya eventually gives in and lets me leave, and I purposely take the long route back to the cabin, hoping the car movement will set the baby off to sleep. Ella taught me that trick. I can't tell you how many trips we've taken around these roads while her kids were teething.

When I get back to our cabin, I see my plan hasn't worked. The baby is wide awake, her green eyes wide and alert as she smiles at me when I open the door. There's no sign of Brax, so I sling her bag over my shoulder and carry her inside. Duke rushes to greet us, immediately sniffing at the car seat. He's used to kids by now. Dylan and Sophia love him, and I leave him staring at her when I set the car seat on the table to make myself a coffee.

The baby doesn't make any noise. She's quite content looking around at her new surroundings.

It's been just over a few months since Brax told me he was gonna knock me up. He got mad at me for being part of Lydia's rescue mission. He's protective over me, and I get that the whole baby thing was a spur-of-the-moment idea he had to guarantee that I wouldn't do anything reckless again. But I liked the idea of us being a family, and I hate that he backed out of it. It also makes the thought of someone else being a mother to his child hurt more than I can bear.

I don't know how long I stand staring at the little girl, wondering what I'll do if she is Brax's daughter. I've lost both my parents. I couldn't take losing him too, and this club has

become my family. Everyone here understands each other. They're forgiving, and I fear that I won't be able to uphold that if I find out Brax has betrayed me.

The front door opens and startles me from my thoughts when Brax steps inside and takes off his cut. I've noticed his tension ever since she got dumped on us. It's too heartbreaking to think why that might be.

"You good?" he asks, pressing a kiss on my cheek before he washes the oil off his hands in the sink.

"What you been working on?" I ask, noting that he doesn't pay the baby any attention. In fact, he's acting like she's not even here.

"Storm's got to have his bike built before he can get his patch. I gotta feeling we're getting close to it."

"Storm's had a bike for ages." I point out.

"That ain't gonna be his bike. That's just a runaround." He tells me, drying his hands.

"I gotta head back out in a few,"

"Where? We're supposed to be on duty."

"You got it, doncha? What use would I be anyway?" he shrugs, and it makes me want to throw something at him.

"I don't think it's fair that I have to look after someone else's kid, especially when her own mother just dumped her."

"You're starting to sound like a brat," Brax warns. "You know what that does to me." He steps into my space and takes my bottom lip in his teeth, dragging it a little before he releases and heads back out the door. He's somehow avoided everything I just said, and when the door slams after him, I growl in frustration.

I manage to get through the afternoon. The baby isn't all that challenging. She sleeps for a few hours, and I put her in her car seat and take her with me when I have a shower. Tawk drops off the bassinet Ella got out of her attic, and once I get her settled, I start to wonder when Brax will be home. I try watching TV. I try reading, but nothing can take my mind off my worry.

It's way past dark, and after the little one has her final feed, I carry her up in the bassinet and settle her in the spare room. I make sure the doors between us are open so I can listen out for her and head to bed myself.

It's a few hours later when I feel the mattress dip beside me. Brax's hand slides around my waist and drags me closer to his body.

"Night, Gracie," his whisper brushes against my neck.

"Where have you been?" I question him. Brax always tells me where he's going. He knows how much I worry about him.

"Club shit." I feel his hand creep over my hip and slide into my panties, and when his finger starts to trail between my pussy lips, I grab his wrist to stop him.

"What?" he laughs, nipping my ear lobe.

"I just don't feel like it," I tell him

"Since when do you not want it, princess?" He laughs so casually that I want to punch him.

"Since I'm worried that the little girl in our spare room might belong to you." When I shift my body around to face him, he's staring back at me like I just fucking stabbed him.

"What the fuck did you just say?" his tone is deep and raspy, and his eyes narrow into slits

“I’m asking if she’s yours.” I put it to him straight, swallowing down all the tears I want to cry.

“Of course she’s not fucking mine! We’ve been together too long. It would be impossible.”

“Devastating, Brax. But not impossible,” I point out, and it makes him scurry back from me like I’ve scolded him.

“Are you suggesting that I fucked Mel while we’ve been together?” His voice shakes from all the rage it’s holding.

I shrug my shoulders back at him as I watch him get out of bed and fist his hair. “Are you being serious? You think I’d do that to you?” His chest is rising and falling frantically out of frustration.

“I just...”

“You know what, Gracie? Fuck *you* for thinking that,” he speaks through his teeth and points his finger at my face. Then, pulling on his jeans, he heads out the door.

I call out his name, but he doesn’t respond, and when I hear his bike take off outside, I lie back on my pillow and burst into the tears I’ve wanted to cry since last night.

I could have handled that much better, but I can’t be blamed for being curious. I love Brax more than I ever thought was possible, but I’ve been betrayed before. I never saw it coming, and I vowed I’d never be a victim of it again.

I like to have time to myself. I don’t always hang out at the club, and Brax spends a lot of his time there. The women who hang around make themselves so easily available. I don’t want to believe he’d do that to me, but losing everyone I care about turned me into a realist. Maybe this life that I thought was too good to be true, really is.



“You’re distracted tonight. What’s on your mind?” Rogue’s warm breath covers my ear as she rests her palms on my knees and slips herself between my legs.

“You really wanna know what’s on my mind?” Sometimes that shit can be too ugly, even for her.

“Always,” her pink-stained lips touch my cheek, sending a wave of heat down my spine.

“I’m deciding whether I’d bury or burn Mel’s body. Or if it would be more justifiable to just dump her, like she did the kid,” I tip back the bottle I’m drinking from and wait for Rogue’s reaction.

“I love it when you talk dirty to me, baby.” She wets her lips and pulls back from me. “One problem. The club don’t off women, remember?” Her eyes roll like she finds our rule pathetic.

“The club don’t but, say that kid belongs to someone here that was already spoken for before Mel got knocked up...” I shrug.

“Ahh.” A cruel smile spreads all the way to her eyes when she understands what I’m saying. “You’re thinking one of the Stepford housewives are gonna go all cray-cray and retaliate.”

The thought excites her way more than it should, but who am I to judge that shit?

“I can’t see any of them taking it lying down.” I look around the bar and see that most of the couples have left already. Jessie and Maddy are still here. Maddy is working on something on her laptop while Jessie is in a deep conversation with Prez and Thorne.

When the door bursts open, I’m surprised it’s Brax who marches through it. He only left here half an hour ago.

“Something strong, the closest thing to ya,” he barks at Tawk, who nods back and quickly fills a shot glass with tequila. Brax knocks it back and slams the glass back on the bar, ready for another.

“The baby thing not workin’ out for ya?” Rogue asks sarcastically, and the evil side glance Brax hits her with makes me want to smash his face in with a shovel.

“You were saying, darlin’?” Rogue innocently turns her attention back to me, and I can see how proud she is of the reaction she’s got from him.

“You wanna get out of here?” Suddenly the atmosphere in the room has turned tense, and it’s been five whole hours since I last tasted my she-devil’s pussy on my lips.

“I thought you’d never ask,” leaning forward, she slowly slides her warm tongue over my jaw, and it makes my fucking dick hard.

We leave the club without bothering to say goodbye. Rogue hops on behind me as I saddle my bike, and I ride us up to our cabin. I’ve barely stepped through the door and turned the lights on before she’s climbing onto my body.

“So how would you do it?” Her arms wrap around my neck, and her fingers fist at my hair.

“Do what?” I whisper against her neck. Fuck, there ain’t nothing better than feeling my girl purring against me like a needy fucking kitten.

“Get rid of Mel.” Her teeth nip my ear, and my cock presses so tight against my jeans I have to release it.

“Depends. How she was killed.” Now’s not the time to be getting technical, but if my girl wants an honest answer, I’m gonna need to know facts.

“Well...” her lips soothe the sting she just caused. “Say someone stuck a machete in her slut-bucket and fucked her with it?”

“Then there would be a lot of blood...” I press Rogue’s body tight to the wall and force my jeans off my hips.

“Uuh, huh,” she mewls, her head tilting backward and exposing her throat to me as I roll up her denim skirt and pull her panties over to one side.

“So. I’d bag her, wrap her up real tight.” My cock slips with such ease between her soaked pussy lips, and I feel her nails dig into my skin through my shirt.

“Then what?”

“I’d take care of all the mess. Clean up the blood, and expel all the evidence. Whoever did it will have been acting out of anger. That makes a person sloppy. The whole place would have to be cleaned.”

“And what would you do with her body after?” Rogue maneuvers herself so her hungry, little pussy is sitting at the tip of my cock, tensing and begging to be taken.

“I’d take her somewhere real quiet. I’d want trees for cover but soft ground that would be easy to dig.” I kiss the skin on her neck to tease her some more. “Then I’d dig a hole and throw her body inside it. Douse her with gas and drop in a match.” I hold back from giving Rogue what she needs because desperation looks so damn pretty on her, and when I pull back from her neck to admire it for myself, she smiles at me. Rogue gets off on my sickness. It feeds her little desires in a way no one else ever could.

“Then I’d stand and watch her burn. Smell the plastic melting into her skin.” I inhale the scent of Rogues’ hair. She smells like strawberries today, a vast contrast to my fucked-up thoughts.

“Grimm,” Rogue says my name so coldly that it actually makes me shudder. “That little story you just told...,” I can hear the darkness in her voice, and her eyes are burning into mine with such intensity I feel it in my soul, too. “... is exactly what’s gonna happen if I find out you’re the father of that little brat. Only difference is, I’ll be right behind you, pushing you into that fucking hole so you can burn with her. You got that?” Her fingers clasp at my jaw and force me to hold her stare as she slides herself onto my thick shaft. I watch how her eyes fill with pleasure, but still manage to contain their fucking threat. I want to close my eyes and bask in the thrill of being inside her, but instead rage tears through my soul and retaliates to what she’s suggesting.

Ripping her hand away from my face, I pin it to the wall behind her, and she crushes her thighs tighter around my hips. I thrust deeper into her tight little hole, fucking her into the wall and making sure I bite and suck every inch of skin I can reach. While her needy cunt sucks around me and she screams for me to fuck her harder.

The whole compound must know about it when she comes. She screams out my name like the devil's ripping the soul from her body. Her tongue slides over my neck, and with one hard thrust of her hips back at me, I fire my load inside her, squeezing her ass cheeks in my fingers so tight I feel her skin bruise beneath them.

Rogue laughs, but it's not a cute little giggle. It's a full-on spawn of fucking Satan chuckle that can only have come from the depths of her dark, distorted little mind.

My fingers slide up her body, and I let the arch of my hand push into her throat. This time it's me forcing her to look up.

"You push all those thoughts from your pretty little head, hellion. The kid ain't mine. There will *never* be another while I still got you. You ever dare to question us again, I swear I'll cut you just to watch you bleed." I can't resist taking her pouty, pink lip between my teeth and clamping down as I drag myself away, sliding my cock from her thoroughly, fucked pussy.

"Promises, promises." Rogue ruffles my hair out of place, knowing how much it riles me then, readjusting her skirt, she struts away from me toward the bathroom. When she glances back at me over her shoulder, the wicked smile on her face tells me I've satisfied her. "You coming, Grimmy? Ain't nothing dirtier than getting clean with you," she licks her lips, and of course, I go after her. She's right, there ain't nothing better than washing my woman clean and then fucking her back to dirty.

“You ever think about us having kids?” I ask her as we get into bed. Rogue’s fully naked, her skin clean and soft. She smells like peaches now and of me, which gives me a real feeling of contentment.

“Us?” she giggles, as she slips under the sheets.

“Everyone else seems to be doing it.” I shrug my shoulders. Does it really seem that fucking out there?

“Are you being serious? Honey, I doubt anyone would let us adopt a puppy from the pound. Maddy wouldn’t even put us on that pathetic daycare schedule of hers,” she looks down to where she’s picking at her nails. Rogue rarely shows it when she’s hurt, but I can see it stung her by not being put on that stupid, fucking roster. I just can’t figure out why.

“It’s because you’re busy in the garage,” I slide in next to her and move her body so she sits on top of me, straddling my hips. I love looking up at Rogue’s naked body, whether she’s riding my cock or not. My eyes could never tire of her or the way those tattoos on her skin compliment her perfectly sculptured curves.

“It’s because I killed that stupid house plant thingy she got us for thanksgiving last year, and you know it.” She reminds me with a pout.

I laugh at her and reach over to the bedside table for my smokes. After lighting up, I drag back, and I wonder if she’s gonna avoid the question I just asked her.

Her hands splay out on my chest, and I exhale slowly, creating a haze of smoke that dances around her body.

“I’m too selfish to share you,” she finally gives in, and I can tell how much she didn’t want to admit that by the scowl she’s wearing.

“You’d be jealous of a kid?” I smirk back at her, taking another lung full of smoke.

“I’m jealous of anything that gets your attention over me,” she confesses.

“And that’s the only reason you wouldn’t want a family with me?” I stare back at her doubtfully. I can’t believe that’s her only reason. You can hardly blame someone for not wanting to procreate with someone who’s made a living out of shifting stiffs, has a severe case of OCD, and more issues than an entire asylum.

“Baby, there are a million reasons why I don’t want to have a family. You’re the least of those reasons.” She assures me. “You and me, we exist for each other now.” Her fingers brush over my jaw. “We’re too fucked to create life, Grimm.” Leaning forward, she catches the stream of smoke I blow from my mouth, between her naked lips. Rogue never leaves the house without a full face of makeup on, and I love seeing her like this, beautifully bare in her natural state.

“I can agree with that”. I trail the two fingers that are holding my cigarette down her neck, sliding them between her pert tits, then down to her stomach. I wonder what it would feel like to have something of mine growing inside her. A product of our destruction, created from this fucked-up form of obsession we got for each other.

“I can’t help but think it would be kinda awesome, though.” Now it’s my time to confess.

I smile when I look down at the ‘Property of Grimm’ tattoo she has across the top of her pussy. You can tell it’s amateur, but hell was I was gonna let Tac or Nyx get that close to her. It doesn’t matter, she loves it and so do I.

“Well, you can bleach that thought right out of your head, hell boy. I’m not ruining my figure for no one. Not even you.” Pulling the cigarette from my fingers, she takes a long drag before resting her body flat on mine and blowing the smoke directly at my face. “Now, you gonna let me fuck you before we get some sleep, or you gonna carry on talking baby shit and turn me off completely? That shit just ain’t on the cards for us, Grimm.”

“I’ll take that first option.” I lift her hips up and find that sweet spot between her legs with the tip of my cock.

“Good choice.” Smiling that wicked smile again, she sits on top of me, her warm pussy taking every inch of me and sending a rush to my head. She pushes the cigarette back between my lips and holds it while I take a pull, and her hips thrust into mine.

I watch her riding my cock, taking from me what she needs without hesitation. She’s too fucking beautiful for words. Hell and Heaven combined into one precious being that belongs to fuckin’ me.

And when it’s my turn to come, I flip her onto her back, steadying myself with one arm on the headboard while my other hand fists her soft, freshly-washed hair.

She stares up at me, watching me come apart like a praying-fucking-mantis that intends to eat me up after, and as I pump my hot seed inside her, I let myself think about what might happen if she stopped getting that shot from the Doc.

Wrapping her legs around my hips, I drop my head into her neck and catch my breath.

I love falling asleep inside her like this. With her, no amount of closeness will ever be enough. It’s an unhealthy

obsession that I have no intention of getting over. I lie against her with my eyes closed, and when her fingers stop drawing patterns on my back and her breaths become still and steady, I make one last confession to her.

“With us...” I whisper softly against her skin. “... nothing will ever be off the cards.”



“S he’s cute, really cute,” I tell Grace as I finish changing the baby and pop up the sleepsuit that used to be Sophia’s.

“Who do you think she looks like?” Grace’s eyes are red and puffy. She looks exhausted.

“It’s hard to tell,” I admit, studying her face a little more closely. She’s got green eyes and pale skin. Her hair is blonde, but that can change. Dylan was born with dark hair, and he’s blonde now.

“You think she could be Brax’s?” Grace’s next question makes me turn my head in shock.

“For her to be Brax’s, he’d have had to cheat on you. There’s no way that would happen.” I shake my head, picking up the baby and placing her back into the bassinet, that also used to be Sophia’s.

“I can’t stop thinking about it, Ella. All those nights he spends at the club, all those women.”

“You’re silly if you think that Brax would cheat on you. He’s crazy about you.” Taking the seat opposite her, I pull Sophia up onto my lap from where she’s playing on the floor.

“Am I really, though? You can’t walk inside that clubhouse without seeing a hot, stunning woman. All of them are desperate to get laid. I’m nothing like them. I’m boring. I read books, and I watch too much reality TV. I bake when I get angry, and I spend most of my time listening to other people’s problems.”

“You bake when you’re angry, huh?” I look around the kitchen at the four trays of cookies and the three lemon drizzle cakes on the cooling racks. “Listen, all those things you just said are the reasons Brax wants *you* and not them. He loves you because you’re different from those women. Have you even spoken to him about any of this?” I help myself to one of the double chocolate chip cookies in front of me.

“I tried last night, and he lost his shit. He stormed out and hasn’t been back since. I was kinda hoping you were here to tell me he crashed at your place.” She bites her bottom lip.

“Sorry.” It feels really awkward but I won’t lie, Grace is my friend.

“Mama, can I feed Duke a cookie?” Dylan calls over from the couch, where he’s watching cartoons with the big, friendly dog’s head resting on his lap.

“They have chocolate in them, baby. Dogs can’t have chocolate.”

“Brax was probably upset that you thought that. Nyx is always telling me how much you’ve changed him. Try to see it from his point of view. If he hasn’t cheated on you, which I’m sure he hasn’t, of course he’ll be hurt.”

“I get that, but he could have tried reassuring me instead of storming off the way he did. What am I supposed to think, Ella?”

“You’re supposed to trust him,” I reach across and take her hand. We girls all look out for each other, we share each other’s problems, and usually, Grace is the one with all the answers.

“Everything just seems so perfect. I’ve been waiting for something like this to happen,” she confesses, unable to look me in the eye.

“You’re scared you’re going to lose him, too?” Poor Grace was close to her parents, and she lost them so tragically. This club has become her family since, but I know she misses them.

“Petrified,” she admits with a sad sigh, as she picks up a cookie for herself.

“Speak to him. Let him know how you feel. But you have to trust him, Grace.”

When the door swings open, Grace looks up hopefully, but her face drops when it’s Nyx that steps inside instead of Brax.

“Daddy!” Dylan races to get to him before Duke does, and when he manages to get to him first, Nyx lifts him up in the air and zooms him around like he’s an airplane before patting Duke on the head for his efforts.

“How are my favorite girls?” He heads toward us, placing Dylan back on the floor as he touches my cheek with his lips. It doesn’t matter how long we’ve been together. Those lips touching me still have the same effect they did the first time I felt them.

He takes Sophia out of my arms and reaches over to help himself to a cookie.

“Grace, these are the shit,” he talks around a mouth full of crumbs, before offering it to Sophia. “Mommy’s cruel, not

letting you have one. Daddy's got you." He winks at her, before helping himself to another.

"So, what are you ladies talking about?" He takes a chair beside us and bounces Sophia on his knee.

"You seen your brother?" Grace asks him, looking worried. "Not since he left the club last night to come home. He did come home, right?" Nyx suddenly looks concerned.

"He came home, and then he rode off again when I accused him of cheating on me with Mel." Grace looks embarrassed by her admission when she hears it out loud again.

"You crazy?" Nyx throws his head back and laughs. "You really think he'd cheat on you? And with a low-budget skank like Mel? Grace, come on, I thought you analyzed people for a job."

"Nyx," I slap my far too outspoken husband hard, on the chest. He has a habit of forgetting himself before he speaks.

"Come on, El. You hearing this?" He stares at me. "Brax is fucking mad about you, Grace. He worries about you night and fucking day. There is no chance he would have even *looked* at another woman down at the club, never mind knocked one up." He hands over Sophia and stands up.

"I gotta shoot. I've got an appointment at the studio for eleven. I just stopped by to give you this. It came in the mail." He pulls a letter out of his cut, and when I realize what it is, I quickly snatch it from him and force it into my bag.

"I have to leave now, anyway. I promised Mom I'd meet her for coffee in that fancy new coffee shop in town, you remember?" I look up at Nyx and offer him an awkward smile.

I know how much he hates my mother, but that doesn't mean he'd ever stop me from having a relationship with her.

"You want me to take care of the kids?" Grace offers.

"No, I'm sure she'll want to see them, and you've got enough on your hands with that little one," I glance over to the bassinet.

"Making you broody, babe?" Nyx winks at me, and when I think about the letter in my bag, the nerves in my stomach flutter faster.

"Don't be silly," I try my best to act normal as I stand up and start to gather our things together.

"I'll leave my bike here and drive you into town," Nyx says, slipping Sophia's baby bag over his shoulder and taking her back off me. Taking two more cookies, he sneaks one to Dylan before taking his hand and heading for the door with them both.

"Grace," he nods her a farewell before he heads out, and I can't help but smile as I watch him. I never could have imagined it would be like this on the first day I saw him at high school, but I wouldn't change a thing. Nyx is the perfect husband and an even better father.

"You hear all that shit back there?" Nyx huffs a laugh as he drives us into town.

"I think she's paranoid. There's always so much drama going on around here, and sometimes I think we forget what people have been through. She lost both her parents, and her last fiancé turned out to be part of a pedophile ring. You can't really blame the girl for being untrusting," I point out, admiring how hot my husband looks when he drives. He's got

that whole slouchy thing going on, and it reminds me to suggest we go for a drive on our next date night.

“When you put it like that,” he looks across at me and smirks.

“So, this coffee with your mom? You good with it?” he checks, moving one hand from the wheel and squeezing my thigh.

“I haven’t seen her since Sophia was born, and I’m pretty sure she’s given up on telling me I’ve ruined my life. So yeah, I’m good with it,” I assure him.

Nyx nods back, focusing on the road ahead of him, and I can tell he wants to get something off his chest.

“What are you thinking?” I ask.

“I worry about you, and want you to be happy at the club. What you just said is right. Sometimes we forget what people have been through.” He glances across at me. “Hell, I wouldn’t change a thing about what we got, but two kids in two years is fast work by anyone’s standards. Your whole life’s changed so dramatically. Sometimes I wonder how you keep up with it all.” He sets off those nerves in my stomach again, and now they’re laced with guilt because I shouldn’t be keeping something so important from him.

“Your life has changed, too.” I point out, not quite meaning for my words to come out as defensively as they do.

“Baby, I’ve got the woman I fucking adore, two beautiful kids, my club, and I get to tattoo every fucking day.” He tells me with a boyish grin on his face.

“And what about Tac? You haven’t got him anymore.” I hate to bring it up when Nyx is in such a good mood, but it

worries me how he never talks about him. Tac was like a father to him.

“Don’t, Ella,” he warns, both his hands now gripping the steering wheel.

“You coping at the studio?” I check while we’re on the subject. It’s hard to get Nyx to open up about anything involving Tac.

“Of course, I’m coping El. It’s what people do in life. They move on. They cope.” I hate how his mood has shifted so fast, and I lean over and kiss him on the shoulder, feeling him relax a little. He moves one of his hands to stroke my head before he kisses the top of it.

When we get into town, he pulls the truck up in the vacant space in front of the studio, and I wave at Maddy and Alex through the window of their office next door.

Nyx hops out of the truck and unbuckles Dylan while I grab Sophia from her car seat. I wait on the sidewalk while he lifts him out, then sits him on the hood of the truck and ruffles his hair in his huge tattooed hand. “Now, you make sure you tell Grandma that Daddy said ‘hi’,” he says sarcastically before he kisses his cheek and places him back on the ground.

“Enjoy your coffee,” he tells me, kissing me hard on the lips.

“Nyx,” I grab his wrist before he can pull away.

“Later tonight, when the kids are in bed, I need to tell you something.” The letter in my bag feels like it’s burning a hole.

“Sure. Good or bad?” He creases his forehead at me, and I look down at Dylan and then at Sophia.

“Good, I think...” I bite my lip nervously, hoping Nyx will think the same.

“I’ll look forward to it,” he promises, taking Sophia’s little hand in his and giving it a shake. “Don’t let the dragon bite.” He reaches down and snaps his hand at Dylan’s tummy before he heads off.

“You’re going to hell, Nyx Carson,” I call after him, watching as he crouches down and unlocks the bolt at the bottom of the rolling shutter door. His strong arm lifts it up over his head, and when he turns back around, smirking like that cocky kid I first saw walking my high school corridor, it’s exactly what I need to assure me everything’s going to be ok.



“So, tell me what I’m up against.” Riley paces in front of me and her brother, Storm, with her arms folded under her chest. She looks so fucking cute when she’s antsy.

“Was she one of your, you know...regulars?” She chews on her thumbnail nervously.

“No,” I shake my head back at her. “I never had regulars.” When she looks at me doubtfully, I make sure the door to Gabriel’s room is closed before I go to her.

“Look, I can’t say there’s not a chance, but I’ve always been careful,” I assure her as I wrap her up in my arms.

I hear the sarcastic laugh Storm makes.

“What’s so fuckin’ funny?” I ask.

“You weren’t being all that careful when you knocked up my baby sister,” he points out, and I scowl at him over the top of Riley’s head. What a great time for the fucker to decide to sprout a fucking sense of humor

“And what about you, young gun? Can you guarantee that kid ain’t yours?” I shoot back, making the smile slip off his face.

“I don’t have time for this conversation. I got shit to be doing.” He stands up from the table and starts heading toward the door.

“Storm, wait,” Riley calls after him, but he slams the door to cut her off, and after a few seconds, we hear his bike tear from the yard.

“He’s such an asshole.” Riley picks up a plate from the table and launches it at the door. Then picking up an orange from the fruit bowl, she tosses that at it, too.

“Hey, hey. How about we try eating the food instead of throwing it?” I sit her down at the table and squeeze both her shoulders. “Tell me what you want, and I’ll make it. You skipped breakfast.”

Being pregnant is making Riley sick. She’s always tired and can barely keep anything down.

“Argh!” Her fingers slide into her hair, pulling it from the roots in frustration as she rests her elbows on the table.

“Come on, my cooking ain’t that bad, is it?” I try hard to lighten the mood but fail at it. So, taking the seat beside her, I coax one of her hands out of her hair and hold it in mine.

“Talk to me,” I whisper, hating to see my girl unhappy.

“It’s just all too much, Thorne. I’ve only just got my head around the fact we’re having this baby.” Her hand strokes over her stomach, and I can’t help but smile. It’s taken Riley a lot longer to accept it than it has me. I’m ready for this fatherhood shit. “Now this. You could have a child with no mother. You know what that means? Three kids. *Three fucking kids*, Thorne!” I can see the stress is eating her up, and I have to do something to eliminate it.

“Riley, I wish I could promise you that the kid ain’t mine. But I can promise you this.” I lift her hand to my mouth and kiss her knuckles. “I will always take care of my family.”

“You think she’s yours, don’t you?” Her eyes fill up with big, pretty tears.

“I’ll be shocked if she’s mine. Like I said, I’ve always been careful. And any encounters I had with Mel were rare ones.”

“Shit. I gotta throw up.” Riley turns a light shade of gray and quickly races toward the bathroom. I’m about to follow her and check she’s okay, but the bedroom door opens, and Gabriel steps outside, holding out a toy truck and carrying that stuffed animal he takes everywhere with him.

“Wheel broke,” he frowns.

“Let’s take a look.” I lift him up onto the table so I can see what I’m working with.

“Where’s Mama?” he asks, looking around the room for Riley.

“Bathroom, buddy,” I tell him, figuring I’m gonna need super glue to fix the broken wheel back onto its plastic axle.

“Baby make her sick?”

“Yeah, baby makes her sick, bud,” I smile at him before I head to the drawer to grab some glue.

“Thorne baby’s daddy?” he asks thoughtfully, while his fingers spin the wheels of the truck that are still attached.

“Yeah,” I tell him proudly as I sit back down in front of him.

“My daddy too, now?” He looks so confused that it breaks my heart.

A nervous lump wedges in my throat because I don’t know how to answer the kid. Of course, I want to be his dad too. But Riley’s only just come to terms with what I did to protect them.

“No, I’m not your dad, but I’ll always be your friend.”

“Not fair, baby get daddy. Mine gone.”

Hearing his words cripple me inside, but I stand by what I did. Raphael Verretti was too much of a threat to them. The only version of love he ever knew was possession.

“Listen, kid. Your dad may not be here. But I am, and I’ll always take care of you the same way I will your brother or sister,” I promise, before I glue the wheel to the axle and place it on the table. “Why don’t you go play while this dries?” I smile at him before helping him off the table, and when I turn around, I notice Riley watching from the bathroom door.

“Come here.” I move over to her and tug her close. I hate to think she might be thinking about him, that he still has power over her. But I can accept it, just so long as she ain’t hating me.

“You handled that well,” she smiles sadly, letting me comfort her. “He’s gonna forget him, isn’t he?” The way she sounds cut up about it makes more guilt riddle my stomach. I’ll never regret taking a man’s life who threatened those I care about, but I hate that it makes those people hurt.

“He’s young. It’s up to you how you help him remember.”

“And what if I don’t want him to remember?” She looks up at me. “Thorne, I want us to be a family. A real family.” I watch the tears escape her eyes.

“Me too,” I assure her, letting my hand slide over her stomach.

“If the little girl is yours, she’ll be part of it.” She pushes back from me with a stern look on her face.

“And if Gabriel ever asks you that question again, you tell him that he can call you whatever he wants to.”

Her words knock me sideways, and although now ain’t the time for grinning, I can’t help the huge one that slides onto my face.

“I love you, Riley Hayes,” I tell her, kissing her lips and grabbing her ass.

“Tell me that again the next time I launch a plate at the wall.” She half laughs, half cries, and I use my thumb to wipe her tears away.

“Darlin’, you’re carrying my child. You throw as many plates at the wall as you want.” I press my lips to her forehead, and when I glance at the clock on the wall, I quickly pull away from her. “Shit, I gotta go. I’m supposed to be riding out to Pueblo with Troj and Brax.”

“Get going. I’ll make myself a sandwich,” she promises, stretching up on her toes to kiss my cheek.

“Gabriel, Thorne’s got to go to work.” She calls out to his room, and when he comes racing out and runs at us, I lift him up between us.

“I’ll be home in time for dinner. You look after Mama for me,” I tickle under his arm and the giggle he makes as he wriggles makes me feel real fucking lucky.

I leave the cabin to ride down to the club, and the first person I see is Jessie. He’s got the face of a man who’s

completely clear of the Mel drama, and I try not to hate him for it. “Maddy got any news on those test kits?” I want to get all this shit dealt with as soon as possible so I can put Riley’s mind at ease.

“Being delivered tomorrow afternoon,” he assures me. “How’s Riley taking all this?”

“About as well as an over-emotional, hormonal pregnant woman can,” I sigh, as we head inside.

“We ready to ride out?” I ask Troj, who’s waiting in the bar.

“Yep, just waiting on Brax,” he ties up his long wavy hair on top of his head as he stands up from the bar stool he’s perched on.

“That mother fucker’s been acting shady as sin,” Squealer pipes up. It’s still strange seeing him sitting beside a double stroller.

“What’s this all about, daddy daycare?” I look around the room for Alex.

“Alex went into the office for a few hours, so I’m on duty, and I totally got this,” he shrugs, looking unfazed.

“Until one of them starts crying, and it all goes to shit,” Jessie laughs.

“Fuck you, VP. I’m yet to see a product of your scrotum,” Squealer swipes back.

“I’m biding my time, watching and learning from all you fucks,” Jessie grins.

“What you guys doing over in Pueblo, anyway?” Squeal asks curiously.

“Gotta speak to Reynolds about a job. He wants a warning dealt.”

“Reynolds as in, Harold Reynolds, strip club owner? Damn, you guys get all the good jobs. Nothing like watching a good set of titties bounce while settling a deal.” He peeks his head into the stroller beside him. “You didn’t hear Daddy say that shit,” he whispers to his two tiny sons.

“Let’s go.” Brax stomps inside to round us up, and the look on his face is unpredictable.

“You know we’re only going to discuss the deal, right?” Troj looks down at the knuckle duster that’s already on Brax’s hand.

”Yeah, and if we end up making one, why waste any time?” he shrugs.

“Whatever gets discussed, you call it in and clear it with Prez before making a move,” Jessie reminds us, and Troj nods his agreement, slapping him on the back before we head out.

“Have fun with the Temper Twin juniors,” I call out to Squealer before I follow them out into the yard.

We make the ride over to Minx’s in around forty minutes. It’s early, and the club is quiet when we step inside, but there are still women on the poles.

Brax keeps his eyes forward as he storms his way through to Reynold’s office, and Troj gives me a worried look as we follow him inside.

“Give me the name.” Brax doesn’t bother with a greeting.

“M-Marco Benick,” Reynolds stutters, clearly shocked by the brashness of our Road Captain.

“Address?” Brax asks impatiently.

“21, Hillside Avenue,” he responds, and Brax nods his head.

“Talk to my man here about the money side of things. Marco will be dealt with.” Brax slaps my chest as he makes for the door.

“Wait. Hang back a second. We haven’t agreed to take the job.” Troj steps in his path. “We need to know what it is Marco did. And what the risks are,” he turns his attention to Reynolds.

“Don’t give a fuck if Marco’s a fucking priest. It’s a job, and it’s how we do business,” Brax says, attempting to shove Troj out of his way.

“He fucked my wife,” Reynolds blurts out.

“I can see why that would upset you,” Troj nods understandingly, trying to calm everyone down.

“He was my daughter’s fiancé,” Reynolds adds, and Brax shrugs at Troj cockily and waits for him to say something.

“That’s fucked up. I say we let Brax go to town.” I throw in my opinion.

“What are we talking, bruises or hospitalization?” I ask, starting to think about respectable figures in my head.

“What’s the price difference?” Reynolds checks, and I glance over to Brax, who looks about ready to kill.

“5K gets you a permanent scar. Ten gets you his balls as a receipt.” Brax decides to take over the negotiation.

“Ten it is.” Reynolds agrees.

“Deal.” Brax steps over to him and shakes his hand.

He marches back through the club and out toward the bikes, so we follow.

“I guess I better call it in to Prez.” Troj takes out his cell.

“You fucking do that. While you do, I’ll head over to Marco’s and castrate him.” Brax goes to kick-start his bike.

“Yo brother, cool your shit. You know the rules. I got to call it in first. We need to check this Marco guy isn’t part of a bigger organization that could bring shit to the club.”

“Jesus Christ. I thought we were fucking outlaws,” Brax shakes his head.

This is gonna turn bad. Brax is in one hell of a mood.

“Look, we’re all cut up over this baby shit. We all got shit to lose, Brax. How about stop being a fucking cunt about it?” When Troj speaks up, Brax gets off his bike and charges for him. Grabbing him by his scruff, he slams him into the wall.

“What the fuck do you stand to lose?” Brax snarls at him.

“Whoa,” I move to stand between them. I don’t want things to get out of hand. There’s no way I could deal with a full-blown fallout between these two.

“Truth is, you don’t have a fucking clue. So don’t try to play down to me how serious this shit is.” Brax lets his grip drop. And somehow, Troj keeps his cool. He’s always been good at that.

We watch Brax get on his bike and speed off without looking back. “That right there’s a guilty conscience, if ever I fucking saw one,” Troj points out, sliding back the hair that’s fallen onto his face.

“He’s right about one thing, though.” I think about Riley and all she’s been through. The last thing she needs is for this

baby to be mine.

“This baby shit is pretty fucking serious.”



“You know, I’ve missed you,” Maddy smiles at me as I step back inside the office with our coffee. I went over there to check all was going okay with Ella and her mom, and it seemed okay from where I was standing in line waiting to be served.

“Give me something to get stuck into, anything.” I sit at my desk and stretch out my fingers.

I needed some distraction from the awful thoughts I’ve been having since that poor, innocent little girl got dropped off at the club.

“Well, Troj just called and asked for us to get some info on this guy.” Maddy smiles at me as she hands over a pink post-it with the name ‘Marco Benick’ neatly written on it.

“Got it.” I stick it to my screen and get to work.

“How did things look over there?” Maddy asks, pointing her head over to the coffee shop.

“It seemed okay, but I wasn’t there long. There was hardly any wait.”

“Maybe I could go over and get us a cinnamon roll to go with these.” Maddy picks up her purse. “You know how

nervous Ella gets around her mom.”

“Sure,” I barely look up from my keyboard as I start searching through the databases Maddy’s software enables us to access.

“Okay then, I’ll be right back.” When Maddy heads out, I breathe a sigh of relief. The girl’s caring by nature, and I’ve been waiting all morning for her to ask if I’m okay about this whole baby drama. If she asks me, I won’t be able to lie. And then all those awful thoughts in my head will have to come out.

I look at the screen at the name I’ve typed in, Melanie Wilkinson, such a simple name for the person who could potentially turn my world upside down. She has a Facebook and Instagram account, and neither are private, but I guess you’d expect that from an attention-seeking whore.

I search through her profiles, and there’s nothing that could give me answers. Just a few pictures with her displaying a neat round bump beneath her leather skirt and black tank top. I can’t figure out where she’s been these past few months because none of the photos are tagged. I’m sure Maddy would have it figured in seconds. But that would require asking her, and I don’t want her to know I care.

I flick deeper into her history and stop when I see a picture of her with Squealer. She’s sitting on his lap, and her lips are pressed against his cheek. Her thighs are on full display, and his tattooed hand is gripping onto one of them so tight his fingers are embedded in her skin.

It makes me feel fucking sick, and when I check the date it was posted, I realize it was a whole month before we met.

I have no right to be angry about it. Just like I have no right to be angry about the innocent little girl who's currently getting passed around the club.

"You find anything?" I quickly close down the server window when Maddy waltzes back through the door ten minutes later.

"Nothing yet." I shake my head and smile gratefully when she hands me a pastry.

"So... how are those adorable boys of yours?" she asks, taking the lid off her cup and blowing.

"A handful," I raise my eyebrows, "and as you can imagine, Squealer is like having a third."

"Totally, but you have to admit, he's come through. The other day when he came down to the bar with that double-sided carrier strapped to him, I spat my wine all over Jessie. It was so cute." She giggles to herself.

"Yeah, it's perfect," When I think about my new little family, I could cry from how happy I am. I never expected to find what I have with Squealer, and now our boys are here, it's just cemented it. Why does life have to be a bitch and throw an illegitimate child into the equation?

"Club shit's pretty quiet at the moment, so Squealer's available, but you know that isn't gonna last. I'm gonna have to start bringing them into work soon," I decide now's a good time to bring up the awkward situation. Things can be busy enough around here without two babies to tend to. I'd totally understand if Maddy was pissed off at the idea.

"I already got it covered," she looks back at me excitedly as she pulls a piece of paper up from her desk.

HELP WANTED, INQUIRE WITHIN

“I thought we could get an extra pair of hands in, part-time, to help with the babies on the days you bring them in. That’s only if you want to, though. We’ll find another way if not.”

“Mads, that’s an awesome idea, but can we afford it?”

“Yes, it can only be part-time for now, but this works too well. We’re making good profits and helping the club in the process, too,” she assures me with a huge smile on her face.

“Then let’s get the sign on the door,” I stand up from my chair and take the sign with me to the window.

“The upstairs apartment is vacant. Maybe in time we could turn it into a space for the boys while you’re working. It might take a bit of work, but we got a whole club of strong men who can help us,” she suggests, handing me the sticky tape before her fingers get back to clicking at her computer. When her phone rings, she answers it and puts it on loudspeaker.

“How’s my favorite genius?” Troj’s voice comes out through the speakerphone.

“She’s good,” Maddy smiles at the phone.

“You got that Marco shit checked out for me?” he asks, and I curse myself for being too distracted with my own shit to get my job done.

“Yeah, he checks out. He’s a realtor, no big connections from what I can see. I can tell you he’s a sleazeball from what I’m seeing on his dating profiles, though.”

My mouth opens when I realize how fast Maddy’s pulled him up.

“You don’t know how good it is to hear that,” Troj says, sounding relieved.

“Problems?” Maddy checks.

“No, it’s all good. See you all later. Thanks, Mrs. Donavon,” Troj hangs up, and Maddy looks over at me guiltily.

“You already had it covered, didn’t you?” I tear the post-it off my screen, and toss it into the trash.

“I could tell you didn’t want to talk and thought you might need a distraction, so I gave you one. Trust me, you don’t want to work on the case I am, right now,” she assures me, and I kind of love her for it. Maddy has a gift. She seems to know what’s good for people better than they do themselves.

“Prez got you working on finding Mel?” I stab a guess at it.

“Yep.” She rolls her eyes. “I’m not a hateful person, Alex, but how the hell could someone dump their baby in the middle of the night? It’s just so heartless.”

I think about my two gorgeous boys and the lengths I’d go to protect them, and I can’t understand it either.

“Guess some people were never meant to be parents,” I shrug. “So, what you got so far?” I ask, giving up on trying not to think about it.

“You sure you want to deal with this? I’ll totally understand if it’s gonna be weird.”

“I know that Squealer’s possibly her dad, and if I’m being honest, the thought eats me up. But I’ve got no right to be angry about it. I wasn’t with him at the time, so he hasn’t cheated on me. This is just one of those things.”

“But...” Maddy encourages me to speak my mind.

“But I can’t be like Shaniya and be all cool about it. I don’t want the baby to be Squealer’s. I’ll be devastated if it is. I like my family just how it is. I’ve barely got the hang of coping with two newborns, and now this shit. It’s too much,” I take a breath, feeling surprisingly better for getting it off my chest.

“Don’t that feel good?” Maddy leans back in her chair and pulls her glasses up into her hair.

“I guess it does,” I laugh, feeling ten tons lighter.

“Now imagine how much better you’d feel if you put all that across to Squealer.” She raises her eyebrows at me.

“I gotta go!” I grab my purse and keys off the desk then rush for the door.

“Good luck,” Maddy calls after me.

Squealer’s truck isn’t in the yard when I pass the clubhouse, so I head straight up to the cabins, and when I burst through the door, he greets me with a panicked look.

“Shhh,” his tattooed finger presses against his lips. “Just got them down for a nap at the same time. I was thinking about taking one myself. What you doing home so soon?” he asks, and the way he wets his lips with his tongue does things to me that I need to fucking ignore right now.

“I hate that the baby could be yours.” I blurt out the words I’ve been holding in and feel the tears start to prick my eyes. I haven’t allowed myself to cry over all this yet, for fear of never stopping, and when Squealer goes to speak, I quickly interrupt him because I need to get all this out.

“We’ve got it fucking perfect, Cody, and the thought of your past catching up with you is killing me. I know I’ve got

no right to be jealous over something that you did before we were together, and I shouldn't blame a defenseless child for being the one to potentially spoil everything, but I can't help it. I'm jealous, and I'm scared, and I..." the tears come, streaming down my cheeks and blur my eyes.

"Hey, come here," Squealer drags me onto him, wrapping his huge bear-like arms around me. Instead of gasoline and cigarettes, he smells like our boys, and I can't help but smile through my tears at that.

"You know I'm scared too, right?" He admits, holding me so tight I feel like I'm being crushed. "I hate that this could be on me. I don't know what I'll expect you to do if the kid's mine, Alex but you can't leave me."

"Leave you?" I stare up at him in shock. "I'd never leave you, Squealer. I just... I don't know. It's fucking hard to accept. I feel sorry for the little thing I really do, but I just hope she's someone else's problem. That's so mean of me to say, and I hate myself a little for it. But I just want things to be perfect for us."

"I'm sorry," Squealer whispers into my hair.

"I don't want you to apologize if she's yours, I want you to love her like you do the boys. I'll have to deal with it. And I will because I love you. I just don't want to think about you and Mel together, creating something special like we did. Is that selfish?"

"Nah," Squealer shakes his head at me, his finger tucking under my chin and forcing me to look him in the eyes. "It's territorial, and it's hot as shit," he tells me with that glint he gets in his eye when he thinks about doing bad things to me. "The boys are sleeping," he reminds me as his tongue wets his lips again. I shove him hard in the shoulder so he falls back

onto the couch, then sliding out of my pants, I climb onto his body.

“Oh yeah,” he bites on his bottom lip and pulls me by the hips, so I crash onto him. He’s hard and pressing through his jeans. My body is practically screaming for him, and when he lifts up his ass from the couch to slide off his jeans, his huge cock bounces free. The size of that thing never fails to amaze me, no matter how many times I’ve taken it.

“I want your tongue,” I tell him. There’s nothing more distracting than my man’s tongue doing what he does best. I need that right now. I want his attention, I want his pleasure, I want it fucking all.

“Your wish is my command, princess,” he slides down the couch so his ass is on the floor, and I sit myself on his face. His rough beard tickles the insides of my thighs as the tip of his tongue touches my exposed flesh, and goosebumps form on my skin. I moan out loud as Squealer’s arms anchor around my thighs to hold me in place. Forcing me to absorb every lick, nip, and suck he gives me. Fisting his hair, I buck my hips against his face. Riding the rhythm of his tongue as he fucks me with it, and when I come, I have to bite on my hand to stop myself from screaming.

I barely have a chance to come down before Squealer slides back up between my legs, crushing my hips as he pushes me onto his thick shaft.

“You’re fucking everything,” he tells me, as he rocks me back and forth, his cock buried so deep inside me that I barely remember my own fucking name, let alone any of my worries.

“*Everything*, you hear?”

I nod back at him breathlessly. The build of another mind-shattering orgasm is already taking root. Leaning forward to kiss his lips, I taste myself all over them. My tongue slips into his mouth, and he sucks it hard as he quickens the pace of his thrusts. When his hand slips between us, and his fingers strum at my clit frantically, I can't contain what's inside me a second longer. I scream out his name as my hips thrash against his body, and his fingers continue to work me until I collapse on top of him. His arms wrap around me and tighten so hard I can barely breathe, and he growls his release, ferally, into my shoulder.

“You feeling better, babe?” he asks when we've both caught our breath. “Yeah,” I don't look up. I keep my head buried into his neck, and I cling to him tight, hoping that he mistakes my tears for the sweat dripping from us.



“Grace is dropping the little girl over in half an hour,” Lydia puts her phone back on the table, then smiles at me a little sadly. I don’t respond. I don’t know how to.

“Are you working tonight?” she asks, and I can see what she’s doing. She’s giving me an easy option. That’s the thing with my wife. She’s always so concerned about the way others are feeling, she rarely takes the time to think about herself.

“No, I’ll be right here helping you.”

She’s crazy if she thinks I’d leave her alone to take care of a baby that could potentially be mine.

“It might be fun. I’ve never really taken care of a baby all by myself before. I’ve helped the others out but never been fully responsible.” Lydia plays with the hem of her T-shirt nervously.

It’s been a few days now, and Lydia still hasn’t asked me if the baby could be mine. I can be sure the reason for that is to spare my feelings rather than her own. She knows how I get when I overthink shit. But it’s a conversation we should probably have, and one I have no idea how to start.

“Ask me.” My words come out low and brash, nothing like they’re supposed to, and when Lydia looks up at me with her

wide eyes full of fear, I suddenly wish I could take them back.

“Did you... are you? Is it possible?” she stutters, her eyes fixed on the table to avoid looking at me.

I hate that.

“I won’t be mad. I can’t be mad.” She adds, as a tiny tear falls onto her hand.

It rips at my chest to see my Lydia sad. After all this girl has been through, I promised her a happy ever after. Raising someone else’s kid wasn’t part of that deal.

“It’s possible,” I nod back, reaching out for her hand in fear that she’ll detach herself from me.

She nods warily but still can’t bring herself to look at me.

“We will take good care of her while she’s with us,” Lydia gets up from the table and heads out onto the deck. I debate following her, but the front door opening and my brother walking in puts all that to shit.

“We gotta talk!” Squealer tells me, looking scared as shit as he pulls up a chair and straddles it. “The night of Troj’s wedding, when we...” His eyes stretch open, begging me not to make him say it out loud.

“When we went twos on Mel,” he hisses under his breath, and I nod back, knowing exactly what he’s talking about. “I was so fucking buzzed I can’t remember if I was top or fucking bottom.” He scratches his head, looking flustered

“You were both. We switched.” I answer back, blankly. Those days seem decades away now.

“It don’t matter where I was, Screw. It’s where I *finished* that fucking counts!” he whisper yells, impatiently.

“We were safe,” I assure him, thinking back to that night. Mel isn’t the only woman me and my brother have shared. Fucking with Squealer always made things less intense for me.

“We were off our fucking asses, Screw. Everyone in this club knows Mel wanted to trap someone. How fucking safe were we?”

“I guess we’ll find out in a few days.” I stand up from the table and head over to the sink. “How the fuck can you be so cool about all this shit? We’re settled. We got good women. I’ve got two fucking kids.”

I want to tell him that I’m anything but cool. I haven’t slept in two nights, spent them lying next to Lydia and thinking about how I’d make it up to her if this is what our future holds.

“How long until the tests arrive?” I ask, ignoring his question.

“Maddy told Alex they’d be here by tomorrow,” Squealer scrubs his hand through his beard. “I gotta go. Alex jumped in the shower, and the boys are sleeping. Look, when you have her here tonight, look out for any signs.”

“What kinda signs?” I look back at him, confused.

“I don’t know, anything that resembles us. The Harrison nose, expressions, arrogance.”

“I don’t think a baby can be arrogant, Squeal.” I huff a laugh at him.

“Trust me, they can be.” The look he’s giving me dares me to argue.

“Squealer. Go back to your family, and don’t fucking panic over this shit. We aren’t the only ones who could have fathered

that kid. There's a whole club full of us."

"Hey, Squealer," Lydia chooses this moment to come back inside. I'm hoping she hasn't heard our conversation, especially the part about us sharing Mel.

"Darlin'," Squeal tips his chin at her and fakes a smile.

"You want a coffee or some sweet tea?" she offers.

"Nah, thanks. I gotta get back." Just as he's about to leave, the door opens, and Grace steps inside carrying the baby. I swear people have forgotten how to knock around here.

"Special delivery," she smiles sarcastically, struggling in through the door with a car seat and a huge bag on her shoulder. Lydia races forward to help her inside while me and my brother freeze. Neither of us have gotten a proper look at her yet. The night Mel ditched her was chaos. Troj's old lady stepped up and took her home while the rest of us recovered from the shock.

"She's gorgeous." Lydia rests the car seat on the table and fusses with her.

"Yep, she's cute while she's sleeping. You wait until she cries." Grace points out. "Either of you boys seen Brax?" She looks up and asks us.

"He left with Thorne and Troj on a job this morning, haven't seen him since." Squeal informs her, keeping his distance from the baby like it's a fucking gator ready to snap. Grace doesn't bother asking for details. She knows what Brax does for the club.

"I got loads more stuff in the car. I'll go grab it," she heads back out the door, and Squealer cautiously steps forward and studies the kid over. Then blowing out a nervous breath, he follows her out.

Now it's just me, Lydia, and a baby that could be mine.

“Come look at her.” Lydia holds out her hand for me to take. “She won't bite, you know,”

Grace comes back inside and places the thing, she must sleep in, on the couch with some other bags, and then as quick as she came, she leaves.

“We can do this, Caden,” Lydia whispers, pulling me closer. When I tuck her tiny frame under my arm and feel her wrap herself around my middle, I allow myself to look down into the car seat at the sleeping baby. Lydia's right. She's beautiful. Her skin looks so soft I'm too scared to touch it.

“I don't care how she came to be. If she's a part of you, I'll love her fiercely,” Lydia promises, and I swallow all the fear that's lodged in my throat and kiss the top of my wife's head. She'll never know how much I appreciate her.

When I wake up, the space beside me is empty, and it automatically makes me panic. I can't count the number of times I've been trapped in a dream where Lydia realizes that she can't withstand all the fucked-up parts of me. Nightmares when she thinks about my past, she sees the monster inside me, and she runs.

I notice the bassinet in the corner of the room is empty too, so pulling on some sweatpants I leave the bedroom to go in search of them.

I find them both on the deck. Lydia is sitting on one of the chairs looking out onto the lake, she's wearing her white

cotton nightdress, and the baby lying over her shoulder is wrapped up snugly.

“How long you been out here?” I ask, crouching down in front of them.

“About an hour,” she whispers softly. “She couldn’t settle, so I thought I’d bring her out here. It always works for me.”

“You should have woken me.” I can’t believe I didn’t hear them. I sleep so lightly that I usually hear everything.

“You looked peaceful. I know you’ve been having trouble sleeping.”

“You look good with a baby in your arms, Lydia Harrison.” I manage a smile. I’ve thought a lot about giving Lydia a kid since she became my wife. Before her, the thought of me ever being a father wasn’t something I could have considered. But Lydia makes this whole world seem like a different place, and she’s helped me figure out where I fit in it.

“You ever thought about being a dad?” she asks, her hand soothing over the baby’s back.

“Lately, yeah. But it’s the kind of thing you can’t fuck up. I hardly had a good role model, and I’d never forgive myself if I got it wrong,” I admit.

“I don’t think you would,” she smiles at me dreamily.

“You ever think about it?” I fire the question back at her.

“I was late a few months ago.” She keeps her eyes down. “I thought maybe I might be... you know.”

“You never told me.” I feel the frown set on my face. I hate the thought of her keeping shit like that from me.

“We hadn’t spoken about it, and I was scared you’d be angry. It didn’t matter anyway, my period came a few days later. But it did get me thinking,” she shrugs, and when she looks up at me, her teeth are set into her bottom lip.

“You want kids?” I try reading her thoughts.

“I think I do,” she releases her lip so she can smile. “I want a chance to do things right.”

My heart splinters. Lydia deserves all that, and suddenly I want to give it to her.

“What we gonna do if she’s mine?” I ask. The weakness in my voice sounds so fucking obvious, but I don’t have to hide anything from the woman in front of me.

“We’ll love her, and we’ll do things right.” She kisses the baby’s head, tenderly.

“You’d do that for me? Love another woman’s child like she was your own flesh and blood?” I check, although I already know the answer. Lydia is the most selfless person I’ve ever met.

“I’d do anything for you.” Her hand slides over mine and squeezes it tight.

“And if she’s not?”

“Then, when the time is right, maybe we could start a family.” She’s got that dreamy look in her eyes again, the one that makes me want to rip my heart out of my chest and put it inside her.

“I like the sound of that a whole lot,” I admit bringing her hand up to my mouth so I can kiss it.

“Come back to bed,” I help her up off the chair, placing my arm around the baby to protect them both as she stands.

We creep back into the bedroom, and Lydia carefully places her back into her bassinet, smiling in victory when she doesn't stir.

She places her pointer finger to her lips and grins as she slides into our bed, and when I get in beside her, I drag her as close to me as I can get her.

Her body touching mine instantly gets me hard, but now's not the time. Not with the baby in the room, so I settle for a kiss before I curl her up even tighter and let myself drift off, looking forward to a future with my wife, whatever comes our way.



“Don’t you just love a good club drama?” I sit down at the big, round table where all the women are gathered. There’s a definite divide in the room. All the men are lined up at the bar, and some of ‘em are looking more scared than others.

“Squealer looks like he’s gonna throw up,” I giggle, and naturally, Maddy scowls across the table at me.

“You don’t have to be so cruel,” she scolds.

“I thought you’d have learned by now that I actually do. Grace, here, even got a name for it, don’t ya?” I look at her and smile sarcastically.

“Squealer’s worried,” Alex says, chewing her nails. I got to admire Alex for a lot of things. She doesn’t bullshit or paste on fake smiles. “Three kids under the age of one would be enough to make anyone worry, right?” She taps her fingers on the table, anxiously.

“Who we waiting on before we get started?” Ella asks, as her eyes fall onto the box of testing kits. One of her brats touches its sticky fingers into my hair, and I whip away quickly.

“Sorry,” she smiles awkwardly, untangling the tiny hand from my blonde strands.

“Just Brax and Tawk.” Maddy looks around the room. Right on cue, the door bursts open, and Brax marches through it. His eyes stare at Grace, cruelly, as he joins all the brothers at the bar, and I almost feel sorry for her at the way they scald.

Anyone can see that Brax has been acting shady since Mel dropped her little bundle of chaos on the doorstep. And I can’t help but wonder if his conscience isn’t as clear as he’d like it to be.

“He didn’t come home again last night,” Grace tells us, trying to hold in her tears and doing a real shit job at it.

“He was still down here when me and Grimm left. It was pretty late. He probably crashed in one of the rutting rooms,” I shrug my shoulders.

“Alone I’m sure,” Maddy adds, giving me another one of her filthy looks.

“Come on, let’s get this party started.” I clap my hands. “Nothing like a good game of who’s the daddy to stir up the shit.”

Maddy picks up the box and makes her way over to Prez. They have a little discussion before, one by one, they call the boys forward. Maddy swabs the inside of their mouths with a long cotton bud, before sealing them back into their individual bags and labeling them.

I watch her do Brax’s and the way he keeps his eyes fixed on Grace, while he holds his mouth open and pokes out his tongue for Maddy to take his sample.

“Men are cunts,” I tell her. It’s all I got to try to make her feel better, and when she bursts into tears and quickly rushes for the exit, the whole table looks at me in disgust.

“Jesus, Rogue, you really are a bitch sometimes.” Ella hands her little girl to Lydia before chasing her.

“What? I was trying to be nice.” I lift up my shoulders to all the judgy faces still staring at me.

“Next time, don’t bother,” Riley shakes her head and sniggers, reaching for one of the lollipops on the table and opening it up for Gabriel.

“All done,” Maddy eventually makes it back to the table. “I’ll get these sent straight off. Where’s Grace?” She looks around for her.

“You’re lucky, Miss Sunshine. Not many women could get away with sticking something in my man’s mouth without me taking a slice out of ‘em.” I distract her from her question about Grace. Last thing I need is a lecture from her.

“Delightful,” she smiles back at me.

“Grace got a bit upset. I think she went home.” Shaniya, ever the peacekeeper, covers for me.

“I need to get these to the post office before five, so they make today’s post,” Maddy double-checks that she’s got everyone’s swab before she seals the box.

“I can’t believe the answer is inside that box. Whoever this little girl belongs to is going to have their life change.” Shaniya smiles at the little girl, who no one wants to be theirs, on her lap.

“You would seriously be okay with raising another woman’s child?” I’m shocked at how these people can be so calm.

“I wouldn’t have a choice.” Alex rolls her eyes, tucking one of her tits back into her top and pulling the tiny baby in

her arms up over her shoulder to rub his back.

“I think any child is a blessing,” Shaniya says cheerfully.

“I’m sorry, you’re all boring me now.” I shake my head and leave the table, heading over to Grimm and wrapping my arms around his neck. He kisses me possessively, and it makes my pussy tingle. The new rules about fucking in the club when the girls are here suck.

“You playing nice?” he smirks at me. Grimm knows I’m not one for mixing with the girls.

“Turns out I’m not that good at it,” I shrug helplessly.

“Where did Gracie go?” Brax asks, trying his best to sound like it’s not a big deal.

“She got upset and left,” I tell him, with a scowl. Men who cheat are scum, in my opinion. They may not be the bitches I chose, but that doesn’t mean they ain’t my bitches. Every single one of those girls have hearts full of kindness. I may see that as a weakness, but it doesn’t mean I don’t admire it. If Brax did the dirty on her, Grace deserves better.

“I need the truck keys,” Maddy comes over with the box tucked under her arm.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Jessie asks her, his nose crisscrossing hers.

“I gotta get these sent away.”

“I’ve got the afternoon free. You really think I’m gonna have you running errands? I’ll get a grunt to get them sent off... Storm!” he calls out.

“I really think I should do it. It’s really important,” Maddy says.

“I got plans darlin’,” he kisses her softly, and I watch a mischievous glisten sparkle in Maddy’s eye.

“Get these sent off, will ya?” Jessie takes the box from Maddy and forces it into Storm’s chest. The Prospect doesn’t look happy, but he follows orders like a good, little errand boy, and Jessie rubs his hands together before hauling his wife up over his shoulder, slapping her ass, and carrying her out.

“So, what do you make of all this?” I ask Skid, when we’re back at work. He’s been back at the club a while now, and although it feels good to have him home, he still ain’t himself.

“I think it’s gonna be tough for whoever the father is, whether he’s got an old lady or not. I can’t imagine being a single dad is easy.”

“Shit...you think it could be you?” I slam my hand over my mouth. I never had Skid down as an option.

“I haven’t found it easy being with a woman since Carly, and then...” he stops himself from giving me any more information, which pisses me off.

“Mel just made it easy. No questions, no judgment.” He raises his huge shoulders and carries on twisting the cap off the radiator he’s working on

“I don’t know what to say.” Yep, he’s done it. I’m officially speechless.

“Ain’t nothin’ to say, if she’s mine, I’ll step up. That’s all there is to it.”

“I always thought you’d make a good dad,” I think about a happier time when him and Carly were together. They were

desperate for kids, and she was pregnant when his sick, bastard brother killed her.

“We’d all help out, you know. Even me,” I assure him. It’s the least I fucking owe the man. He saved my life with this place when I was a kid. He just didn’t know it back then.

“You looking after a kid? Now that I would like to see,” he chuckles.

“Is it really that crazy?” I ask, feeling that niggle in my chest again, the same one I got when Maddy never put me on her pathetic list and the one I felt when Grimm asked about us having kids.

“You’re just so.... you,” Skid laughs, his oily hands roughing up my hair as he slides past me to pick up a wrench.

“You don’t think I could do it? Take care of a kid?” I fold my arms and wait for his answer. Skid has always had a way of knocking down all my defenses.

“Rogue, I think you’re capable of anything you put your mind to,” he tells me.

“But...” I add when I feel one coming.

“There ain’t no buts if having a kid is what you really wanted to do. You’d do it well. Your determination won’t let you fail.”

“I never said I wanted a kid. I said I could take care of one.” I point out, trying to ignore how good what he just said has me feeling.

“So, what are you asking me? That if the kid’s mine, would I leave you to take care of it? My answer is yes. I’d want you caring for my kid above anyone else on this compound,” he chuckles to himself.

“Now you’re just talking crazy.” I want to punch him for mocking me.

“Rogue,” the smile drops off his face, and he’s looking at me seriously now. “If that little girl was my daughter I’d want her to grow up taking no shit. To be strong and know how to take care of herself. I’d want to know whoever I left to watch over her would put her life before their own. Who’s better for all that shit than you?” His words pierce me in the heart like a dagger, and I have to think of something really rotten to stop myself from tearing up.

“Well, maybe you got a point with that,” I try my best not to smile. “You just hope and pray that kid ain’t yours because auntie Rogue here has got a whole lot of tricks to teach.” I wink at him before getting back to work.



I get back from town and throw my keys on the table before I slouch onto the couch. My head feels heavy, and my fists are still pumping full of fucking venom. That asshole should never have looked at me like he did when I walked into the bar. All I wanted was a quiet drink alone to clear my head, and that fucker sealed his own fate when he thought he could get away with his snide comments about me wearing a Prospect cut.

He served a purpose. For those few minutes I spent beating the shit out of him, the anger didn't plague me.

What most people here don't know about me is that I wasn't born angry. I never used to be this way. There was a time in my life when I was actually happy. Strangely enough, it was back when I was living on the streets, and it was just me and Riley against the world. Dodging the system and doing whatever it took to put food in our bellies.

I should have protected her better. She was my responsibility. But I couldn't split myself in half. I was on to a good thing working for Felix Daniels. He had a never-ending chain of supply. He paid well, and had I been around long enough to earn more of his trust, it would have got us off the streets.

My eagerness to please him is what caused all of Riley's hurt. I put everything into the tasks he gave me. All I focused on was moving up the ranks so I could get better jobs and make more money. In doing that, I forgot my main purpose.

Riley was taken by a predator, then gifted off to another. My little sister suffered for all my faults. It doesn't matter that she's got her son back or that her life is on track with Thorne. I can't forgive myself for what she's been through.

No punishment dealt to me will ever be enough, not even the one I've already endured.

Maybe this kid will be the next thing I fuck up. I can't rule out the possibility of her being mine. All I can do is hope and fucking pray for her sake that she ain't.

I'm just opening a bottle of vodka when my phone rings. It's Maddy, and I'll bet she's checking in to make sure I did my drop-off job properly.

"I got your package off," I answer the question before she even asks it...

"That's great. Are you still in town?" I can already sense another job coming on from the tone of her voice.

"Just got back." I screw the lid back on the vodka.

"I left one of my files at the office, and I really want to work from home tomorrow. I was gonna see if you'd call by and grab it."

"Tell him to grab it anyway," I hear Jessie call out from the background.

"I'll head back out there and get it. Just text me the code for the key safe and what it is you need." I hang up the phone

and head to my bedroom for a clean shirt. The one I'm wearing is torn up and bloody from the bar scrap.

I look in the bathroom mirror as I wet my face. The cunt bust my lip open when he tried fighting back. It looks a lot worse than it feels, though.

I grab my phone, and when I leave the cabin, the sky is looking heavy. So, to save myself from getting soaked, I decide to take one of the cages instead of my bike.

I'm not far from town when I check my phone and read the message from Maddy. The rain's really coming down now, hitting the windshield faster than the wipers can sweep it clear, and when I pull up outside the office, I quickly hop out and dash toward the door.

The rain's in my eyes, but I can just about make out the shape of the girl who's looking through the window.

I get closer, and when I blink the water drops from my eyes, I can see that not only is she drenched wet through, but she's fucking beautiful.

I quickly type the code into the key safe, and when the light turns green, I pop it open and release the key. I hold open the door, gesturing for her to get inside first. I may be a savage these days, but my mama ingrained some manners into me before she died.

The rain slams hard against the leather on my back, soaking my hair so it falls in front of my eyes, and when I get inside and shut the door behind me, I'm suddenly very aware of the fact I'm alone, in an enclosed space with the girl who looks like she could ruin a man with a smile.

We stare at each other in awkward silence, just the sound of rain pelting against the roof and windows, and as hard as I

fucking try, I can't seem to take my eyes off her.

The shower must have caught her by surprise because the flimsy fabric dress she's wearing sticks to her body. I try to think of something to say as I follow the tiny water droplets that trail down her leg all the way to her dainty little ankles.

"Sorry I..."

"I don't work..."

We both speak at the same time, and I get a hard-on from the embarrassed smile she makes when she gestures for me to go first.

"I don't work here. I'm just picking up something for the owner." I explain, trying my best to stay focused. It ain't often a female gets my attention the way she is. In fact, I can't remember a time at all.

"I saw the notice in the window." She looks up through her lashes timidly. The girl clearly feels awkward around me, and for some fucked-up reason, it gets me the fuck off.

"I really need a job," she adds, before flicking her eyes to the floor.

"You need to speak to Maddy or Alex on that one." I scratch the back of my head just to do something with my hands. She's damn perfect. Her blonde hair may be weighed down by the rain, but I can see it's got a natural wave to it. Her eyes are brown, almost chestnut colored, and her features are so petite and pretty. She looks like she was made up for one of those fairytale stories Mama used to read to Riley.

"Could I leave my number for them?" she suggests, interrupting my thoughts.

“Yeah, sure.” I quickly shift into action, drying my hands off on the front of my jeans and searching around Maddy’s desk for a pen and something to write on.

“Get it down here,” I hand her a post-it pad, then offer a smile before I head over to the metal cabinet to find what I came here for. Then flicking through all the neatly stored files, I find the one that matches up to the text Maddy sent me. When I turn back around, the girl’s still there, watching me, and yep, she’s still just as pretty as she was two minutes ago.

“You’ll get them to call me?” she checks, handing over the post-it she’s written on. Her hand is trembling from where the rain’s chilled her skin, and I want to take it in mine and make it warm again.

I take the number and glance down at it. Even her handwriting is fucking perfect, and I admire the swirly letters that spell out her name.

J-as-mine.

Jasmine.

“Pretty,” I curse myself when the thought slips out of my mouth, and she looks at me curiously.

“Sorry?”

“Your name...” I clear my throat and pull at my T-shirt collar when I feel the heat start to creep up my neck “It’s pretty.”

“Thank you,” the smile on her face grows wider, raising her cheeks, and for some reason, it makes me fucking ache inside.

“What’s your name?” She tilts her head slightly, sounding genuinely interested.

“They call me Storm.” I know it would be polite to offer her my hand or something, but I’m too scared to touch her. I don’t want to ruin her.

“They, as in the club?” her eyes shift to the Prospect cut I’m wearing.

“I’ll make sure Maddy gets this and gives you a call,” I swerve the question, sliding the number inside my jeans pocket. I don’t want this girl to judge me. The club is misunderstood by out-of-towners, and I know this girl isn’t from around here. I’d have noticed her if she was.

We get hit with that awkward silence again, the pair of us standing, looking at each other, and waiting for hell knows what.

“I should get back,” she speaks up first, and when I look out the window, I see that it’s still hammering it down outside.

“You got a car?”

“No,” she shakes her head, not even looking downtrodden by the fact she’s about to get soaked.

“You need a ride?” More unintentional words spill out of my mouth. This is dangerous, not to mention fucking stupid. There’s enough shit going on in my head right now without me laying out a path to temptation and fucking walking it. Innocent, pretty girls like the one in front of me don’t go for guys like me and my wanting to have her for a little longer only proves that I love to make myself suffer.

“I don’t want to put you out,” she shakes her head, already making her way to the door, and something desperate inside me doesn’t want her to leave. I don’t feel like I’ve got enough of her yet.

“It ain’t no trouble,” I assure her, beating her to the door so I can pull it open for her. We both stare out at the street. The drains must be flooded because there’s water rushing down the gullies and streaming through town.

“I promise I’m not some weirdo that’s gonna take you hostage, or some shit,” I hold up my hands defensively, then curse myself for saying exactly what one of those weirdos would say.

“If you’re sure,” her eyelashes flutter back at me, making my fingers twitch to fucking touch her again.

I take off my cut and hold it over our heads before we step out into the rain. It forces her closer to me, and I manage to get the place locked up and the key back in the safe, one-handed, before I dash us toward the passenger side of the truck. I pull the door open so the girl can hop inside, then tossing my cut onto her lap, I rush around the hood to get into the driver’s seat beside her.

“I really appreciate this,” she tells me gratefully, and when I see her holding my cut in her hands, it looks so out of place resting on her lap. Especially when I notice that there’s still blood on the collar of it.

“Where to?” I ask, trying my best to sound friendly.

“You know Hillside Avenue? It’s out toward Cripple Creek.”

“I know it,” I nod. Cripple Creek is a nice area. I’ll bet she’s from a decent family who has good morals and sinless souls.

“Do you work around here?” she asks, trying her best to make polite conversation. It’s been a while since anyone’s

pulled that shit with me. Everyone at the club knows I'm a loner, and that's exactly what they allow me to be.

"Yeah," I offer her no further explanation. I don't wanna get into what I do with her.

"I just finished college. That's why I'm looking for work," she continues trying to make the effort.

"Makes sense," I nod my head. I know that this is my cue to extend the conversation, but I have no idea what to say.

"So, are you a member of the club?" Her finger brushes over the Prospect badge on my cut.

"Not yet, but I will be," I'm a little surprised at how proud that makes me feel. It may not be the path I originally had in mind, but nothing means more to me now than becoming a fully patched Soul.

The club gave me a purpose when I had nothing, and they taught me a way to channel all my anger. I may be more down for the blood and violence than the whole family spirit shit they got going on, but I like knowing Riley is protected by them, and I guess they're the closest thing I ever got to having friends.

"Are they really as bad as people say they are?" there's a hint of mischief on those luscious lips of hers.

"That depends if you're a friend or an enemy," I answer truthfully.

"I try to avoid making enemies," she smirks at me as she places my cut on the seat between us.

"No one ever intends to make enemies." I take my eyes off the road to sneak another look at her and spend the rest of the ride to Hillside Avenue trying to focus on the road. It feels

fucking impossible with her sweet scent filling the space around me.

“Stop here,” she tells me when I get to the end of her street. “That’s me right there.” She points to the perfect white picket-fenced home, complete with a porch swing and freshly cut lawn. “I better get out here, or I’ll get lectured by my pa for getting a ride home from a stranger,”

“So you should. It’s a nasty world out there.” It’s a sad fact, and no one knows that better than I do. Even thinking about those sick cunts while I’m looking at her don’t feel right.

“Thanks for the ride. Who knows, maybe if the job thing works out, I might be seeing you around.”

Her smile suggests she likes the thought of that. But I can’t take any hope from this. The best thing I can do for this girl is put a flame to that post-it with her number on it.

“Maybe,” I shrug my shoulders, and it takes all my inner strength to stop myself from reaching across and stopping her from getting out of the truck.

“Goodbye, Storm.” The way she says my name as she jumps out makes my spine tingle, and I sit like a fucking creeper and watch through the rain-splattered windshield as she rushes to her gate and runs up the path to her door.

I wait until she’s inside before I slide into reverse and turn the truck around, and when that dark, heavy cloud casts its ugly shadow back over me, I realize that while I was with her, it wasn’t there.



His hands pin me to the floor, and his body crushes mine. I try to fight, but I can't shift him off me. I'm too weak, too tired, and I'm left with no option but to suffer the pain.

My body burns from the inside out, and whatever fabric is left of my clothes sticks to my skin. I try to breathe, but it doesn't matter how far I reach, I just can't catch that breath. I'm suffocating. Drowning in fear, and all I can do is hope he'll come to save me.

"Darlin', wake up... Shan!" Troj's voice pulls me out of the darkness, and when I'm brave enough to open my eyes, I'm relieved to see his handsome worried face.

"You were dreaming. It's okay, you're home, you're safe." He wraps me up in his arms, and I grip hold of him tight, while I try to catch my breath. I'm shivering, yet sticky from sweat, and despite all the horrors I've just had to relive, I know there's only one thing that will make my fear go away.

"Put your hands on me," I look up at my husband and stroke my trembling fingers over his prickly jaw. I can still feel their eyes on me and their fingers clawing at my flesh. I need him to make it go away.

Troj says no words, just nods his head back at me because he knows.

I can't think about how sick, or twisted, it is that I need him like this. It's just one of those things that we've both come to accept. I lay back on the mattress, and Troj gently trails his hand over my body. His fingertips skim over all the places that they tainted as he slides up under the T-shirt I'm wearing and cups one of my tits in his palm. He squeezes me with just the right amount of pressure while his hooded eyes study me, checking I'm okay.

He's never questioned me or asked me why this is how it has to be. It's one of the many things I love him for. Troj just accepts that this is what I need and gives it to me.

"You wanna come on my fingers first?" He lowers his touch to my panty line, and when I nod back at him, he gives me that gorgeous, crooked smile that tells me everything is okay. Those men can't hurt me anymore. They're all dead. Troj made sure of that, and I know he'd do it again and again to protect me. All that's left of my attackers are memories, and although they can be crippling, I have the cure to them right here.

My body shivers in a whole different way when his finger skims through my pussy lips, gifting me with that familiar comfort that comes from his pleasure. Troj knows my body inside out, and when he teases my entrance with the tip of his finger while massaging my clit with his thumb, I start to feel whole again.

I reach between us, taking his cock in my hand. It's hard and heavy, and he moans as I wrap my fingers around it and pull him through my fist.

“Jesus, Shan.” When he pushes his finger inside me, I soak them as he strokes that sweet spot inside me. It never takes him long to get me off, sometimes I think just looking at him could make it happen. When the pressure starts to build in the pit of my stomach, I grip at the sheets and prepare for what comes next.

Troj watches me as I come for him, with my hips thrashing against his hand as he continues to fuck me with his fingers; and when I’m done, he takes those fingers, keeps his eyes focused on me, and sucks them clean.

I stretch my legs open wider to make space for him between them, and as he shifts his body on top of mine, he takes his cock in his hand and strokes it as he guides it to where I need him.

I stretch around him as he slowly pushes inside, and with his body leaning over me and his forehead pressed into mine, he starts to thrust.

He takes me slow and steady at first, allowing all the tension to rebuild inside me. His hand frames my cheek, and his thumb rubs over my bottom lip. He’s trying so hard to be gentle, but I feel the tension in his fingers, and I see the anger in his eyes. My nightmares haunt him, too. Troj will never forgive himself for not being able to save me that night.

“It’s okay,” I nod my head to reassure him, knowing that he needs relief of his own. He needs to feed that primal, territorial instinct and remind us both that I’m his and no one will ever take me from him again. It’s taken us both time to realize that, on nights like this, he doesn’t have to be gentle. I can be the cure to his pain, too.

He slams his hips against mine a little harder, his fingers trying to grip my slippery skin as he pounds into me, deep and

fast.

He's angry at them, and I'm angry too. We don't need a shrink to tell us that that's normal, but this isn't. This is our life. We live it how we choose, and if being fucked hard by my husband after a nightmare is what keeps me from falling apart, screw what's wrong or right.

"I'm gonna cum," Troj warns, pushing his hand between us and rubbing my clit with his fingers to make sure I finish with him. He growls into my hair, his body turning rigid, and I grab his ass in my hands to keep him inside me as my pussy throbs around his cock.

"Fuck," he breathes out heavily, his body going heavy on top of mine, and when he wraps me up tight in his arms, I don't mind feeling crushed because I feel safe.

"I'll never let anyone hurt you ever again." He promises, lifting his head and staring into my eyes, so I know he means it.

"I know." I lift my hand to stroke his long, unruly hair.

He reaches over to his side of the bed and grabs a pillow, then gently pulls himself out of me. He lifts my hips and tucks it beneath them. When he lays back down beside me, we both stare up at the ceiling in silence.

I want to know what he's thinking, but I won't ask for fear of his honesty. Instead, I slide my hand across the mattress to reach for his.

"It's gonna happen, Shan. We just gotta be patient," he promises, clutching my fingers between his own.

It's been a few months since we got our results back from the clinic, and although the news wasn't great, there is a

chance. At first I was grateful for that, but as the months go by, it's starting to feel like a curse.

If there was no hope at all, I could train myself to cope with that fact. But instead, every month, I find myself on the same journey of hope that leads to disappointment.

"I hope she's yours," I admit, keeping my eyes focused on the ceiling to avoid his.

"Don't say that, Shan,"

"Why? Why don't you want me to say it? It's true." I turn my head and face him. "And if you're being honest with yourself, it's what you're thinking too."

"I don't want you to say it because it sounds too much like you're giving up. You heard what the doctors said. There's every chance we can have our own baby. And we will. I'll get the money together for the treatment if we need it. It'll only take a few fights."

"I don't want you to have to do that," I shake my head as a tear drops onto my pillow.

"Well, I'm gonna anyway," he smiles at me sadly. "This is just mind over matter kinda shit, Shan. We get faced with challenges all the time. You just gotta have a little faith."

"It's hard sometimes. I don't begrudge the others, not at all, but watching all their families start to grow. I can't help..."

"Hey..." He leans over, crushing my hair in his fist as he kisses the top of my head. "...I know," his grip softens, and his palm soothes my sweat-soaked hair.

"It's all gonna be okay," he promises.

I nod my head to assure him, but I don't convince myself. There's a devastating hunch inside of me that knows this is a

fight he can't win. I can't explain how or where it came from. It's just there, festering and swallowing more of my hope as time passes, and it makes my heart hurt for us both.

It's still early morning when Troj arrives back from his run, and he does a double-take when he notices the baby sitting in the highchair beside me at the table.

“What's she doing here? I thought we didn't have a shift till tomorrow?” He strokes her cheek with his finger on his way to the refrigerator.

“Did you honestly expect Tawk to take care of her?” I raise my eyebrows at him doubtfully. “Anyway, I thought maybe we could all spend the day together, like a family.” I try spooning the banana, I mashed up, between her lips, but they won't open. So I tickle under her chin to make her giggle and manage to shovel some in.

“Shan...”

“Yes,” I pull my focus off the baby to look at my husband. It's obvious he has something on his mind from the tone of his voice.

“Don't you think you're getting a little too attached?” he asks. I can see from the look on his face that he's trying to be tactful and spare my feelings.

“No, I think this poor little girl deserves better than being treated like a burden by everyone,” I hear the defensive bite in my voice.

“The chances of her being mine are slim.” The poor, sorry look on his face says it all. When you've been through what I

have, you get used to people pitying you. I've learned to deal with it. But Troj's pity stings because it reflects his own pain.

"She could be your only chance of being a father," I watch her spit out the banana and make sticky fingerprints on the coaster I gave her to play with.

"Shan, I've told you..."

"Yes," I slam the bowl I'm holding on the table. "You're always telling me to stay positive, but we never talk about what we'll do if it never happens and I want to talk about it now!"

"You wanna talk about it? Fine, we'll talk." He strips out of his sweaty tank top and slams it on the floor, then waits for me to start.

"I can't understand why you don't want her to be yours. Why aren't you seeing this as an opportunity?" I look at the cute little girl who has no idea what's happening to her right now, and my heart breaks.

"Shan, if she's mine I'm gonna love her. You can rest assured about that, but it won't stop me from wishing that her mother was you," he tells me with pain in his voice, and hurt in his eyes.

"If I can't have it all with you, I'd rather not have it at all. I don't need that little girl to be mine because with, or without, a kid of our own, I've already got my fucking dream right here in front of me."

His rant takes me off guard and I stare back at him, speechless.

"I love you. Of course I want a baby with you, but if that doesn't happen, I'm still gonna feel like the luckiest mother

fucker walking because I got you as my wife. You are my world,” he steps into my space and takes my face in his hands.

“You’re *it* for me, Shaniya. What do I have to do to make you see that?” He creases his forehead and begs me with his eyes to believe him.

“I love you too.” How can I not believe him when he shows me every day?

“We take each day as it comes,” he reminds me before his lips touch mine, and when we get interrupted by a cute little giggle, he pulls away and looks at the baby.

“What ya say? You wanna get out of here for a few hours, kid?” he asks her with a grin on his face, before turning back to me. “A day together sounds perfect. I’ll go take a shower.”



My brother storms into the studio and slams the door behind him so hard he makes the walls rattle.

He marches straight for Hayden, grabbing him by his cut, and lifting him off the chair he's sitting in.

"Outside," he drags him to the door, forcing him out onto the street before turning his wild eyes on me.

"What the fuck's got into you?" I huff a laugh, as I step behind the desk and start rolling a blunt. It looks like one of the veins in his neck is about to explode, and I figure he could use something to calm him down.

"What the fuck's got into me? How about what the fuck's got into *you*?" The way he's staring back at me suggests I'm the one he's got the issue with here.

"Brax, you're gonna have to be a little clearer," I lick my tongue across the rolling paper and seal it.

"Troj's wedding night, how's that for fucking clear, Nyx?" He slams his palm on the wooden desk and snarls at me.

"What about Troj's wedding night?" If my brother had any trace of a sense of humor, I'd think this was all part of a joke.

“I’m glad you can fucking laugh about this. I always knew you were reckless, but I didn’t think you were stupid,”

“Seriously, what the *fuck?*” I’m starting to sense this is going somewhere I ain’t gonna like.

“I saw you,” he narrows his eyes on me. “I saw you coming out of the rutting room with Mel, the night of Troj’s wedding,”

“Are you being serious with this?”

“Gracie left her purse in the kitchen when she was helping Marilyn, and when I went upstairs to get it for her, I fucking saw you. Fuck, Nyx! You got a wife who adores you and two fucking kids who deserve better. Not to mention the fact that if Prez finds out that kid’s yours, you’re a dead man walking.”

Now Brax just looks disappointed in me, and after scanning my brain trying to figure out what the hell he’s talking about, it eventually comes to me.

“The night of Troj’s wedding,” I shake my head and roll my eyes. “Yeah, I was upstairs with Mel, but I didn’t fuck her. And you should know me better than that,”

“What do you mean you didn’t fuck her? I saw you leaving her at the door.” Now some of his rage has worn off, he looks confused as hell.

“What you saw was me doing Squealer a favor,” I clue him in.

“What?” Brax snatches the blunt from between my fingers and lights it up, taking a seat on one of the stools and getting ready to hear me out.

“Squeal and Screw had just double-teamed her, and Squeal realized he’d left his blow upstairs in the room. You know how

Mel can be and how Squeal used to have a fuck and chuck approach... Me and Tac had a rock, paper scissors over who went up to get it for him. I lost.”

“That’s it?” Brax looks stunned. “I’ve been stressing and trying to come up with a way to save your ass over a baggy of fucking *blow*?”

“It seems that way,” I laugh. It’s only been a few years since I learned I had a big brother, and although Brax can be a little overbearing at times, it feels fucking good to have someone having my back, especially since I lost Tac.

“Jesus, kid,” he blows out a relieved breath and shakes his head as he grips the counter.

“You really think I’d jeopardize everything I have with Ella for a skanky whore like Mel?” I move to sit beside him and take the blunt he offers me.

“It shocked the hell out of me when I saw ya together,” he admits.

“Why didn’t you say something before now?” I ask, hating the fact that for all this time he thought I could be disloyal to Ell.

“Because I didn’t want to believe it was true, and if it was, I didn’t want to be a part of it. Yeah, our lives have changed, but I like the way it’s turned out. I guess I just tried to blank it out.” He throws his glare down at the floor.

“Brax, you should know I would never...”

“She thinks I cheated,” he cuts me off, like his words need out, now or never. “After all we’ve been through and the way she makes me feel, she thinks I’d hurt her like that.” He scrunches up his forehead and shakes his head like the confusion of it all is causing him physical pain.

“You need to talk to her, put her mind at rest,” I try offering him some advice. But I gotta admit, I’d be feeling pretty shit if I thought Ella doubted me.

“Doesn’t matter how much I tell her or how much I change, she still doesn’t see what she means to me.” He takes the blunt back and inhales it sharply.

“Maybe she’s scared. Sometimes when we have everything, all we can focus on is what we stand to lose. You can’t question that the girl loves you, and if she didn’t, she wouldn’t be so cut up by the thought of you betraying her.”

“I don’t know how to make her see.” Brax rubs his hand over his face like he’s exhausted.

“Well, avoiding her ain’t the way. Like I said, you need to talk to her.”

“I couldn’t do it...” he shakes his head and makes no sense at all.

“Couldn’t do what?”

“When we got the girls back from saving Lydia, I was so mad at her for thinking she didn’t have a reason to stay behind. I really wanted to give her one. I took her back to our cabin, and made her flush all her pills down the toilet. I had every intention of giving her that fucking reason, Nyx. It’s what she wants, I’ve known it since the start. You see the way she is with your kids, she’s dropping hints all the time. But when it came to it, I just couldn’t. I rode off and got her a new batch of pills from the doc, and you should have seen her face the next morning when I gave ‘em to her,”

“When you say you couldn’t...” I approach the subject with caution.

“Not like that. I jibbed before I came and pulled out,” he throws me one of his warning looks.

“You don’t want kids?” I check because if he don’t, I can see this being a problem. I’m pretty sure Grace has the first three names already picked out.

“I don’t know, it just seems so selfish. What if they turn out like me?”

“Then they’d be pretty fucking awesome,” I try making light of it, but I should know better. When it comes to Brax, there is no fucking light.

“You know what I mean. Yeah, Gracie has changed my life, but I’m still me. I still carry a shit ton of hate around. I still like to hurt people. It’s inbuilt into me, and that’s a hella lotta crap to dump on a kid.” He breathes out slowly, like saying it out loud has brought him some relief.

“I want to give her everything she wants. I’ve laid awake at night watching her sleep and thinking about how perfect it could be. But the truth is, I’m scared.” Hearing him say those words makes me realize he’s actually fucking human.

“You got nothing to worry about,” I grip his shoulder firmly, and when he looks up at me, he’s got an unconvinced look on his face.

“What would you have done if I had been the father of Mel’s kid?” I ask.

“I’d have kicked your ass, then I’d have helped you figure a way to stay alive,” he answers without any hesitation, and I laugh to myself, knowing it’s the truth.

“If you’re half the father that you are a brother, your kid’s gonna be the luckiest kid in the damn world. That fear you got is what’s gonna make damn sure of it,” I tell him.

“I had no idea Dylan was coming, but I’ve loved him from the moment I saw him. Hell, I loved Sophia from the moment Ella slapped my face and told me she was pregnant again. I’m scared every day Brax, but I wouldn’t trade it for nothing,”

He nods his head as he takes in what I’m saying.

“Go to talk to your girl, and stop blaming her for doubting you when you’re doubting yourself,” I offer him the only advice I got, and he shocks the hell out of me when he stands up and pulls me in for a hug.

“Mom would be real proud of you,” he slaps me hard on the back, then keeping his head low so I can’t see his eyes, he heads straight out the door to his bike.



I find it easy to talk to most people around here, but the person I'm about to go speak to is a tough one. I don't know how to approach him, let alone the thing I want to ask him about.

Grimm is exactly where Rogue said he would be, down in his creepy basement. The strong smell of disinfectant does nothing to help my nausea. I find him welding something together, and when he notices me watching him, he stops and lifts up the front of the helmet he's wearing. He doesn't say anything, just stares at me like he's expecting me to talk.

"Hi," I try to smile, swallowing thickly as the nerves build in my stomach. What I'm doing feels like a betrayal to Thorne, but for me to move on, I need closure. "We haven't really got to know each other all that well..."

His blank stare is enough to make me realize small talk isn't required, so I get straight to the point.

"I want to know where you, um... I need to know where he is," I hear the tremble in my voice, and when Grimm frowns back at me, I wonder if I've pissed him off.

"I just need that closure," I explain, and for a long drawn-out couple of seconds, he scrutinizes me with his eyes like he's

trying to understand me.

“There’s a quarry. It’s a few miles from Pueblo. We call it Sinnerman’s Quarry,” he stands up and heads over to his neatly organized workstation, taking a pen and jotting something down.

“That zip code will take you to it. There ain’t no spot. They end up where the wind takes ‘em.” He speaks the words with no emotion, and I can’t help but wonder what the hell goes through his head when he’s disposing of people.

“Thanks,” taking the paper from his hand, I get out of there as quickly as possible and take a huge gulp of fresh air when I get outside.

Rogue is waiting for me over at the garage, and as soon as I nod my head to let her know I got it, she tosses me her car keys.

“You sure you’re gonna be alright with him here?” I check, looking at where Gabriel is sitting behind the wheel of the car she’s working on.

“Of course. I’m gonna show that stuck-up little computer freak that I’m more than capable of being responsible for a child,” she tells me, with a look of determination on her face.

“I’m sure you will.” I move past her so I can kiss Gabriel goodbye.

“You listen to Rogue and don’t touch anything,” I warn him.

“Daddy Thorne!” He looks out the windshield in front of him with a huge smile on his face, and Rogue tries really hard to stop herself from laughing when she sees Thorne making his way over.

“What’s so funny?” he asks her, as his arm slips around my waist and he kisses my cheek.

“Nothing at all,” she sniggers before getting back to work. Thorne shakes his head like he’s given up trying to understand her and then places the box he’s holding in my hand.

“I got Marilyn to make them for you fresh. You need to eat breakfast.” His stern eyes warn me, and I can’t help smiling at him when I open the lid and see the four freshly-baked cookies inside.

“The ginger is meant to help with the sickness. And I told her to make sure they were soft inside but not undercooked because...”

“I love you,” I cut him off by kissing him, and Gabriel giggles when Rogue looks at him and sticks two fingers in her mouth, pretending to gag. “I’ll eat them on the way to town, I promise.”

“You’re going to town?” Thorne sounds surprised.

“Cupboards don’t stock themselves.” I feel really shitty lying to him, but the last thing I want is for him to get the wrong idea about why I’m doing this.

“I’ll come with you. I was gonna do some bookkeeping, but it can wait,”

“Actually, I wanted to go by myself,”

Thorne stares back at me in confusion, and I quickly explain.

“I need to start doing things on my own. I used to be independent. These simple things were taken away from me,”

He nods his head like he sees my point, but I also know that it will remind him of what Rafe put me through, and that

will be making him mad.

“Just you and me then, kid,” he raises his eyebrows at Gabriel.

“Actually, I’m taking care of him,” Rogue stands in front of the car door to block him, and Thorne immediately looks at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“Her?” he questions.

“Yes, me. And I’m perfectly capable. We’re gonna have fun, ain’t we Gabe?”

“Rogue, we appreciate the help, but I’m free. We don’t need...”

“Oh no, you don’t. I’m watching him, and I’m going to prove to Maddy-whoever-the-fuck she is now, that I am perfectly capable of keeping a little human alive,”

“With all due respect, Rogue, I’d rather you not use our little human as a test to that,” Thorne swerves her and reaches in through the window of the car to lift out Gabriel. I can’t help but smile at the fact he used the word ‘our’. When he told me he’d treat Gabriel the same way he would his own child, I had my doubts, but so far, he’s given me cause to believe him.

When I see the disappointment on Rogue’s face, I do feel guilty, though.

“Babe, I did say Rogue could watch him, and you’re gonna be busy with the books. It’s only going to be for an hour or so. Rogue won’t let any harm come to him.” I’ve come to realize that Thorne’s overbearing manner only comes from a good place, but sometimes it has to be maintained.

“Okay,” he agrees, kissing the top of Gabriel’s head before he hands him over to Rogue. “Don’t touch anything,” he

points his finger at him before turning his attention to Rogue. “For the next couple of hours, nothing is more important than him. You need me. You call.” He warns her.

“Sure thing, Daddy Thorne.” She salutes him, and I actually hear him growl in frustration before he turns around.

“And you, eat those cookies,” he manages a tiny smirk before he slams his lips onto mine and leaves.

Sinnerman’s Quarry is eerily quiet and yet also beautiful. I wonder how many have been laid to rest here as I pull up in Rogue’s car when the track comes to an end. I don’t get out, and it’s ridiculous that I feel the need to lock the doors. I don’t need to protect myself from Raphael anymore. He’s dead. He can’t hurt anyone. There’s so much I wanted to say to him, but now that I’m here, I’m suddenly lost for words.

These last few months I’ve had with Thorne have shown me what real love is. It’s compromise, compassion, and selflessness. I know I push Thorne’s boundaries. I know he likes to be in control, but he never takes it from me. With him, it feels like I gift it to him.

“I want to hate you,” my words come out, as I look out the windshield at the wildflowers and overgrown grass. “I want to be happy that you’re not here anymore but the truth is, I pity you, Rafe,” I wipe away the tear that streams down my cheek because I’ve given this man far too many of them.

“You thought what you felt for me was love, but it was your own version of it. You would have controlled me my whole life, and you would have raised our son to think that it was okay.” Suddenly, talking to a windshield doesn’t seem so

stupid. Just like Grace told me, it feels good to get my words out.

“I won’t deny our son the opportunity to have a good father. I will *not* taint him with who you were. Your Verretti name, and its curse, ended with you.”

I think about yesterday morning and how happy Thorne looked, when I told him Gabriel could call him Dad. It made me feel guilty for all the time I spent feeling like it would be taking something away from Raphael. All he ever did was take for himself and for his son’s own good I will take this from him.

“Thorne will raise your son, and he will love us all the way we deserve to be loved. And any love you thought you had for me, you can keep.”

I take the expensive silver cross necklace Rafe gifted me with. It was a replacement for the one he took from me the day he brought me to his house. The one he took may not have been worth much, but it meant something to me because it belonged to my mother. He even had to take that from me and replace it with something of his.

He kept it like a trophy and sent it back to me with Thorne. I’ve worn it ever since, and I like how it makes me feel close to her again. This overpriced jewelry piece in my hand, that he thought could match that, holds no value to me. It never did, and so opening the window, I hold out my arm and drop it onto the ground.

“Goodbye, Raphael Verretti. Your binds no longer hold me.”

A strong sense of power washes over me when I restart the engine and turn the car around, and as I drive away from

Raphael's resting place, I don't even look in the rear-view mirror.

All that matters now is what's in front of me.



“Come on, out with it,” I wait until Gabriel’s asleep in his room, and we’re getting into bed before I ask her. She’s had that look on her face ever since she got back from town. Either she’s done something she knows I won’t like, or she’s going to ask me to do something I won’t fucking like.

“Out with what?” She tries acting innocent, but the smile she gives me isn’t selling it.

I say nothing, just give her that look that reminds her I’m not fucking stupid.

“Okay, so I have three things to tell you,” She confesses, and I can only assume the overly calm tone she uses is to stop me from freaking out.

“First of all, I ate the cookies. All of them, and I actually kept them down.” She snuggles in beside me and rests her head on the hand that’s propped up by her elbow.

This is bad, very bad. The fact she’s starting with a positive ensures that what’s coming is gonna be tough.

“I’m pleased to hear it,” I trace my finger around her belly button. I love that her tummy’s starting to stick out. All her

tops are starting to get too short for her now.

“I also went to Sinnerman’s Quarry.” My finger stops moving when I hear what she just said, and when I look up at her, she’s biting her lip like she’s scared of my reaction.

“How did you know?” I avoid eye contact with her. The last thing I want to talk about when I’m in bed with the woman I love, is her dead fucking ex.

“I asked Grimm,” she admits, and I pull away from her, laying back on my pillow and tucking both my hands behind my head.

“Don’t be like that. Let me explain.” Riley shifts her body so its straddling mine, and grabbing my jaw in her hand, she forces me to look at her.

“I had to have some closure. I had things I wanted to say to him,”

God, this fucking stings, but I can’t let her see that. Riley’s entitled to her emotions, and I won’t have her feel guilty for them.

“I want you to be Gabriel’s father. I don’t want it to say ‘unknown’ on his birth certificate. I want him to have you, the way we will.” When she tugs at one of my hands and rests it on her stomach, I swear I feel my heart double in size.

“Ri, the kid’s already got me. You know that,”

“It’s the last thing that connects me to Rafe, and I want it severed. I’ve decided I don’t want Gabriel to ever know who or what his father was. He’s young, and he’s already forgetting. I want you to become all he ever knows,” her eyes brim with tears.

“And what about when he’s older?” I question, knowing how dangerous secrets can be for men who grow up around here.

“We can re-evaluate. But for now while he’s young and carefree, I want him to have everything he deserves,”

I nod back at her because I agree, and I’m honored that she thinks I’m the man who’s worthy enough to give him that.

“What’s the third?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at her, especially when she lowers my hand so that my fingers skim the edge of her panties.

“Well, this is more of a request.” She bites that fucking lip again, and the helpless look on her face makes me wonder if the girl knows that there ain’t a single thing in the world that I wouldn’t give her.

“I can’t help feeling sorry for Sylvia. If it weren’t for her, you guys would have never found me. She knew what Rafe did was wrong, but all she’s guilty of is loving her son,”

“What are you getting at Riley?” I speed her to the point.

“I want her to have a part in Gabriel’s life. She’s got herself a place in town because she wants to be close, and I understand she’s got a long way to go to earn our trust, but if she can agree to the way we’re gonna raise Gabriel, then I’m prepared to give her a chance,”

“Gabriel is your child, Riley. If you want her in his life, I can’t stop that,”

“Thorne, Gabriel is *our* child. You get to make these kinds of decisions, too,” she points out, and as I look up at the woman who’s flipped my whole world upside down, I can’t help but smile.

“Okay, we’ll figure something out,” Riley seems shocked by my answer. She was obviously expecting me to argue with her.

“You mean it?” she smiles so brightly, it makes me question what limit I’d go to for her.

I slide my fingertips over Riley’s panty line before I cradle her tiny little bump in both my hands.

“Yeah, I mean it. If she cares about you and Gabriel, and she can respect how we want to raise him, we’ll find a place for her in our lives.”

“I’m really happy you said that,” Riley leans her body forward and pushes her hand between us. She pulls down the front of my sweatpants to release me so my cock rubs against the fabric of her panties. When she uses a finger to hook them to one side, and I feel her warm sensitive flesh against me, I almost get distracted from the fact I can sense there’s more she’s got to tell me.

“Why?” I frown at her suspiciously as I slide my hand up her body and grip hold of that red hair.

“Because I invited her here to dinner, tomorrow night.” Riley sinks herself onto my cock and takes my mouth with hers before I can make any response. Feeling her tight pussy squeeze around me, as her tongue dances around mine, brings me to the conclusion that those limits are fucking endless.



I pace the floor while I wait for Nyx in the members-only bar, and when he finally shows up, I feel the need to snap at him for keeping me waiting so long.

“Sorry, I ran over with a client at the studio. What’s up?” He sits at the barstool casually, and I take his fearless approach toward me as a good sign. Nyx has a shit poker face. I’ve played him enough times to know that, and right now, he ain’t coming across like a man whose life is hanging in the balance.

“Something’s wrong with Ella,” I tell him, and suddenly his whole posture changes.

“She’s keeping something from me, and I don’t like it,” I admit, pouring us both a drink.

I noticed it last week when I asked her if she was feeling okay, the way she responded was far too defensive. I get the kids can be hard work, but Ella takes it in her stride. Something’s up.

“Something like, what?” Nyx looks both worried and confused as he stares back at me.

“I don’t know. That’s why I called you here. I was hoping you did.”

I let him think while I knock back my drink.

“Come to think of it, she did tell me she needed to talk with me about something,” he mentions, and I sense from the look on his face that he’s starting to get to my level.

“Have you noticed anything different about her? Have you and her been fighting?” Maybe I’m being overprotective, but I know my girl, and I know when something’s wrong. If Nyx is the cause of it, he will fucking fix it.

“Oh, my god...” Nyx’s eyes stretch wider, and it does nothing to calm my palpitations.

“She was saying the other day how she was tired, and that letter came through for her the other morning. We were supposed to talk about it the other night, but never got round to it.”

“What letter?” I ask, hoping he’s gonna hurry the fuck up and bring me up to speed.

“Well, that’s how the doctor sends their appointments through,”

“What fucking doctor? Is she sick?” I ask, downing another whiskey and really starting to fucking panic.

“No. She ain’t sick. She’s pregnant,” it dawns on him with a smile. “I gotta go talk to her.” He rushes to the door, and I remain speechless as I reach for the bottle and pour myself a measure, double the size of the last one.

“What’s gotten into him?” Jessie looks over his shoulder and chuckles as he steps into the room to join me.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” I shake my head in defeat. I can’t say I don’t like the idea of another

grandchild, but hell, that boy needs to learn to hold back. Three kids in four years is enough to send anyone crazy.

Jessie shakes his head and quickly moves on to why he's here. "Me and Mads are on baby duty tonight, so I was thinking you might want to have Brax and Storm oversee the Jenkins issue,"

"I'll speak to Brax," I assure him.

Len Jenkins hasn't shown his face in Manitou Springs for over ten years, and for good reason. He used to wear our patch, but he betrayed us. He thought we wouldn't notice a few missing guns, and maybe we wouldn't have if the stupid son of a bitch hadn't sold them on the streets of our own fucking town. Justice has been waiting to catch up with him, and ever since I heard from Roswell that he'd reared his ugly head and got arrested in a town nearby, I've been ready to put that justice into action.

Jessie, not wanting to be in on the execution of that, comes as a huge surprise.

"You're gonna let Brax have all the fun?" I mock him.

"On this occasion, yeah. I wanna prove to Maddy that I can take care of a kid, and tonight's my chance."

"Jesus fucking Christ, you're all turning soft," I shake my head before I take another mouthful of whiskey.

"I was thinking, maybe it might be a good idea to have them take Ruckus with them to pick Len up. Hell, I hope it never comes to it, but it might be good for him to see what happens to traitors," Jessie's got that savage look in his eyes that proves he ain't gone soft at all. We've been doubting the Long Beach Charter's intentions for a while now, and as much

as I hate to think that any of my fellow brothers would betray me, too much has happened for it to be a coincidence.

What I need to figure out is if the whole club's in on it or a select few.

“Good idea. Make it happen.” I nod my head, and when Jessie doesn't go anywhere, I figure this ain't all he came here to say.

“I was thinking, what are you gonna do if she's yours?” He cuts right to the chase, and taking my glass with me, I move to rest in the leather armchair where I usually sit.

“I ain't got a fucking clue,” I shake my head and unleash a long nervous breath. I haven't really allowed myself to think about it because when I do, it feels overwhelming.

“You wanna tell me what the chances are?” Jess pulls up a chair opposite me.

“As good as anyone else's,” I admit, knowing the risks are way higher than that. I may spend most of my nights inside Haven, but I've spent a lot of them inside Mel too, and there was a time around when that baby was conceived when Haven was visiting her folks, and Mel was my main source of entertainment.

“Shit,” Jessie don't even pretend he ain't worried for me.

“I can't do it, Jess. I'm too old to start over. I'm a grandpa, for fuck's sake.” Just saying it out loud makes me feel pathetic. How the fuck can I be this damn old and still worrying about this shit?

“But you will,” Jess stares back at me, so full of confidence.

“How can you be so sure?” I laugh at his integrity.

“Because you’re you, and if she belongs to you, you’ll take care of her the way she deserves. You’re a ruthless man, Jimmer Carson, but when it comes to family, you’re the softest shit I know.” He leaves me with that one, heading back out, but when the door closes, and I’m left alone, it’s hard not to think of all the people I’ve let down in my life.

Hayley, Mary-Ann, the brother I left in Montana.

But a man can only learn from the mistakes he’s made, and there may have been devastating outcomes from them, but they’ve taught me something, and that’s to take nothing for granted. This club is my family and Jessie’s right. If the little girl, that got dumped on my clubhouse doorstep, turns out to be mine, it’s the last time she’ll ever suffer rejection.

I may not be perfect, and I may have made some mistakes, but I know the difference between right and wrong, and I’ll do right by her.



“Hey, darlin’,” Nyx bursts through the doorway earlier than I expected him to, and the huge grin on his face suggests he’s had a good day.

“You look happy,” I giggle.

“And why wouldn’t I be?” He drags me onto his body, and kisses me before lifting Sophia out of her high chair and kissing her, too.

“Where’s the boy?” He searches around the room for Dylan.

“He’s in the nursery playing,” I can’t help thinking that I’m missing something when I notice Nyx staring back at me with a huge, dopey-assed grin on his face.

“So, you had a good day?” I question him, deciding since he’s home early, I’ll make a start on dinner.

“Yeah, and I got a feeling it’s about to get better.” He takes Sophia over to the playpen and puts her down, taking her favorite doll off the couch and making sure she’s settled with it. Then he comes back into the kitchen and sits at the table, watching me with that smile still fixed on his face.

“What’s with you tonight? Are you high? You know the rules about coming home...”

“I ain’t high, baby,” Nyx shakes his head at me.

“Then what’s with the creepy smile?” I laugh.

“I’m just looking forward to seeing you get all fat and being unreasonable with me again,”

I raise my eyebrows when he stands up and comes to me, lifting me onto the kitchen surface and nipping his way up my jaw.

“And I’m *really* looking forward to that overactive sex drive phase,” he whispers.

I force him back and stare at him blankly.

“Nyx, what are you talking about?”

“You know what I’m talking about. I’m talking about the thing you wanted to tell me the other day. And I want you to know that I’m really, fucking happy about it,” His eyes flick down to my stomach, and when his hand slides to rest there, I burst out laughing.

“You think I’m pregnant?”

“Wait, ain’t ya?”

“No, I’m not. Jesus, Nyx!”

I hop down off the counter to get my purse.

“This is what I wanted to talk to you about.” Taking out the envelope that arrived for me this morning, I hand it over and watch for his reaction as he reads it.

I don’t know what was going through my head when I applied to go back to college. Things are hectic enough around here, and I have no idea how we’ll manage. But when I got the

acceptance, I couldn't help but feel excited and I really hope Nyx is with me on this because, for it to work, I'm gonna need his help.

His eyes continue to scan over the letter and my nerves get worse.

“Ell, this is fucking awesome,”

I let out a huge sigh of relief when he looks up and smiles at me, and it makes me wonder why I ever doubted him.

“I kinda did it on a whim after all that shit went down with Lydia. I felt so helpless staying behind, and as much as I love the kids and want to be with them every second, what happened to Abby made me realize that life is short. I want to be more than just a mom. I know it's gonna be hard work and...”

“We'll figure it out,” Nyx interrupts me, stepping toward me and pushing his finger under my chin to raise my head. “I'm so fucking proud of you, and I know, however hard it gets, we'll make it work. I can cut some of my hours in the studio. Maybe see if we can take on another artist. I'm sure the girls will be happy to help out, too. This is gonna be awesome.” He kisses me.

“Are you sure? You seemed pretty excited about the whole baby thing,” I point out, noticing how it makes him blush.

“Yeah, and who wouldn't be? If me and you do one thing perfectly, it's baby-making, and I intend to make plenty more of 'em with you, Ella Carson. But we got all the time in the world for that. This right here...” he slaps the letter in his hand. “Is something to celebrate.”

“I don't even know why I was scared to tell you. I should have known you'd be okay with it.” I feel so foolish now. Of

course, he was gonna support me. Nyx is the most supportive, unselfish person in the world.

“Oh shit!” The sudden look of panic that strikes his face has me worried.

“What?” I ask, as he kisses my cheek and rushes for the door.

“I gotta go find your dad. He thinks I knocked you up again.”



I give Brax the debrief and leave him, Storm and Ruckus to see it through. When I get to my cabin, the whole place looks like it's been turned upside down.

“Thank god, you're home! You have to take her,” Maddy dumps the screaming baby in my arms and tugs at her hair.

“She's been crying for a solid hour, and I don't know how to make her stop,”

“Hey, it's all good. Just relax. She doesn't know us. She's been passed from person to person these last few days. She's probably just scared,” I look down at the red-faced little thing and rock her gently, but it doesn't seem to make any difference.

“She was fine when Shaniya was here earlier, but when I put her down for a nap, she started crying, and she hasn't stopped since. It sounds like she's in pain,” Maddy looks concerned, and I do the best I can to calm her down as well as relax the baby.

“Come over here,” I take Maddy's hand in my spare arm and lead her over to the couch, then sitting down, I force her to sit beside me.

“Getting stressed and worked up is only going to make her more upset. Babies pick up on that shit.”

I lay the little girl back against my legs and hold on to her feet, gently rocking her between my knees. It takes a few minutes but eventually, she calms down, and her loud wails wind down into tiny, little snuffles.

“See, she’s relaxed. She knows we got her, and we’ll take care of her.” I watch the little thing on my lap regulate her breathing and wonder how the hell Mel could have dumped her here like trash.

“Maybe it’s just me she doesn’t like,” Maddy sounds down on herself, and I wrap one of my arms around her shoulder and tuck her under my arm.

“You’re impossible not to like. She was just picking up on your stress,” I assure her.

“She is kinda cute,” Maddy starts to warm up and offers the little girl her finger.

“I feel sorry for her. She hasn’t even got a name,” she says sadly.

“You’re right there, but it’s her father’s job to give her one, not ours.”

“Life’s cruel, ain’t it, Jess? Shaniya’s desperate for a baby, and Mel just left hers out in the cold. You know, I’ve been thinking and the best-case scenario is for her to be Troj’s.”

I kiss the top of my girl’s head and can’t help but agree with her.

I know my sister went and had the fertility tests the doc suggested she get done, but neither she nor Troj has told us the outcome. I can only assume the news ain’t good.

“Unfortunately, life don’t work like that,” I tell my old lady, as she strokes the little girl’s cheek with her finger.

“So what do you figure the worst-case scenario is?” I ask, looking at her tiny features and trying to match them to those of my brothers.

“That she belongs to Tac,” I hear the worry in Maddy’s voice. She’s right, life without a mother and father is hard.

“You know, if she was his, this club would take care of her,” I do my best to put her mind at rest.

“I know that,” Maddy snuggles her head deeper into my neck, and as I watch the baby girl’s eyes grow tired, I feel Maddy’s body get heavier too.

I sit staring at the poor little thing on my lap while they both sleep. This little girl never asked to be brought into the world, especially by someone like Mel. Maddy’s right. A child is a gift and Mel didn’t deserve the right to become a mother if she was prepared to give it up so callously. There’s plenty of ways she could have done this. She could have put her up for adoption or contacted the father directly. What she did was a fuck you to us and to use her baby to do that, makes her more savage than any one of us.

When I hear a knock at the door, I wonder how I’ll answer it since I’m all tied up, but I needn’t worry, no one around here ever knocks, and when it slowly opens, and Shaniya creeps inside I point to the sleeping baby before she makes any noise.

“I just got Maddy’s voicemail. We were having dinner at the reservation, the signal’s terrible,” she whispers, sneaking closer and admiring the baby.

“It’s fine. We got it all under control,” I smile at my sister as she takes a seat in the chair beside me.

“I can see that,” she smiles.

“Where’s Troj now?” I ask.

“He went down to the club and said an old friend was stopping by who he wanted to see.” She smiles so innocently that I assume she has no idea about Len-fucking-Jenkins.

“You wanna hang out for a while?” It’s rare I get the chance to spend time alone with my little sister, so rare that I still haven’t gotten used to it.

“Sure,” she stands up and heads over to the refrigerator, returning with two beers in her hands.

“Can you tell me something about our dad?” She kicks her feet up on the coffee table and slouches back in the chair.

“What kind of something do you want to know?” I’m careful not to wake the baby, or Maddy, when I twist the cap off my bottle.

“Anything,” she smiles.

It’s real sad Shaniya never got to meet him. I may not have had him for many years, but it was long enough for me to know he was a good man.

“Okay, I got one for you,” I think about what he’d want to say to her if he were here right now, and I share a memory that I’ve never shared with anyone.

“When I was seven, I’d always be hanging out at the bar that he ran the Utah club out of. I’d watch him and the way he did stuff, wishing I could be just like him. He was the hardest bastard there, all the other brothers respected him, and all the women who hung out there wanted his attention.” She laughs with me when I tell her that.

“One night, when I couldn’t sleep, I went downstairs to get a drink, and I heard him crying. I watched him through the crack in the door, sobbing and falling apart.”

Shaniya stares back at me, looking intrigued.

“I didn’t have the balls to disturb him and ask what the matter was. He was a proud man, and I didn’t want to embarrass him, but I remember learning something from it,” I admit.

“What?” Shan leans forward and places her bottle on the coffee table, waiting for me to tell her what it was.

“I learned that, no matter how strong we try to be and no matter how savage we become, everyone’s got a breaking point.”

I watch her rest back in the chair and take in what I’m telling her.

“Did you ever find out why he was crying?” She asks.

“No, knowing he was human was enough back then, but sitting here today, I wish I’d asked him.

Things around here can get real hard, and we all have that breaking point. If you get to it, and you need someone...”

“I hear you,” she places her hand over mine with a proud-looking smile on her face.

“The doctor says there’s a chance,” she surprises me when she takes her drink in her hand again and starts to explain. “I know it sounds crazy, but it kind of makes it worse because it’s not happening.”

“That don’t sound crazy.” I shake my head at her sadly.

“Troj is mad at me for wanting her to be his, but I can’t help it. She seems like the answer to all our problems, and I can be her mom, Jessie. It wouldn’t matter that she wasn’t mine.” There’s a tear in her eyes as she looks fondly at the baby I’m holding. The ache I feel in my chest only confirms how much I’ve come to care for my sister in the short time I’ve known her.

“What does Troj say?” I ask, already knowing that seeing her hurting will be killing him.

“He tries to be strong for me. He tells me it doesn’t matter and that I’m enough,” I stretch my spare arm out to take her hand again.

“You know he means that. You *are* enough. My best friend fucking loves you.”

“I know, he proves it every day, but I just wish I could give him more.”

“You’d both make great parents,” I agree. Any kid that belonged to them would be lucky.

“So will you. And I can’t wait to be a kick-ass auntie,” she laughs through her tears.

“I don’t think this little one helped much with that today. She put Mads through hell. I’m assuming that’s why you got the voicemail.”

“It’ll happen,” Shaniya finishes the last of her beer and stands up.

“And how can you be so sure?” I have to be careful not to shake too much when I laugh. I don’t want to wake Maddy, or the baby.

“Because I’ve seen it.” My sister beams back at me with a contented look on her face.

“You’ve seen it...?” I look at her like she’s crazy. Shaniya hardly drinks, maybe that beer’s gone to her head.

“Yeah, I’ve seen it.” Her eyes roll at me for mocking her. “A beautiful, little girl with long, blonde hair and blue eyes like the ocean.”

“And when exactly do you see this happening?” I humor her.

“She’ll come to you at a time when you need a reminder of how strong you are,” she assures me.

“A daughter.” I shake my head, and for a few seconds, I allow myself to imagine it.

“Yes, a daughter. And if I were you, I’d prepare yourself, Jessie. Because she will have the determination of you and her mother combined.” She kisses my cheek, and leaves me on that thought and as I rest my head back and take in what she just said, I feel a smile grow on my face.



I stand looking at Len Jenkins' body. His blood is setting on my hands and dripping off my knife blade, and when I use my forearm to wipe my brow, I can feel it there, too.

"I hope you weren't supposed to get any information out of him." Ruckus sniggers at the dead cunt who betrayed our club.

"I got all I needed." I keep breathing, enjoying the calm while it lasts.

"You ever think about Grace when you're doing it?" Storm's question comes out of nowhere.

"What sort of weird-assed psycho question is that?" Ruckus stares at the kid like he's got a screw loose.

"Yes," I answer Storm's question without hesitation. Maybe it's sick, but it's the truth. Since Grace came into my life, she's all I think about when I do this kinda shit.

"I'll go fetch Grimm," Ruckus shakes his head at us both before he heads back upstairs to the club, leaving me and Storm alone. I'm guessing from the way he's looking at me that he's got more to say.

“How do you go home to her, after?” I don’t know where all this is coming from, but it feels fucking deep, and what’s more frustrating is that right now, I have no idea if she’s even gonna be home. Everything Nyx said earlier may have been right, but it don’t stop her lack of trust in me from hurting.

“What the fuck’s gotten into you?” I put a question on him to avoid having to answer.

“Nothing,” his head shakes defensively, and he pulls out his smokes, offering one to me before he lights up. “It’s just that seeing you guys with your women makes it easy to forget you do this.” He shoves his boot into the body to roll it over, and I balance my smoke between my lips and crouch down in front of it. Using my knife I slice through the flesh on Len’s shoulder, where our club badge is still tattooed on his skin. I should have done it while he was living, so he felt the pain, but I got too bloodthirsty.

“Look, I don’t know how it is for everyone else, but for me, it’s like this...” I decide to share my thoughts with the kid. I’m his sponsor, after all. “...before her, I did it because I had to feed something. I was angry and mad at the world, and making low-life assholes like this one hurt took some of that anger away.” I toss the chunk of bloody flesh in my hand at Len Jenkins’ body.

“And now?” Storm asks so eagerly that he barely gives me a chance to finish.

“And now... I do it because I need this world to be a better place for her,” I wiggle my switchblade loose from where I lodged it between Len’s ribs and clean it off on his jeans.

“Does that make you weaker?” Storm continues with his fucking Spanish Inquisition.

“No,” I stand up and blaze my eyes into his. “It makes me even more fucking dangerous.”

I crush my cigarette out under my boot. “You got any more questions before you help me shift this stiff into Grimm’s room?” I check.

“I saw a girl,” Storm shocks the life out of me when he blurts out his confession. I ain’t the guy people come to with these kinda things. It makes me fucking uncomfortable, and I feel all the muscles in my forehead crunch together as I glare back at him.

“I kinda spoke to her, too, and...” he surprises me even more when he starts to look shy about it.

“And?” Hell knows why I’m pushing him for more. I got my own problems.

“And she was nice,” he shrugs. “*Too* fucking nice.” Grabbing Len’s wrists, he drags his arms over his head while I take his ankles.

“So when you spoke to her, what did you say?”

I never figured being the kid’s sponsor would entail all this shit, too. They should warn you about that crap when they sign you up to it.

“Nothing really. She stopped by the office asking for a job, it was raining heavily, so I gave her a ride home. But when she got out of the truck...”

“It hurt like fucking hell?” I can’t help but snigger, as I finish his sentence for him while we shuffle the dead weight through Grimms’ door and dump him on the floor. The poor boy has no idea what he’s got coming to him.

I dust off my hands and leave the traitor for Grimm to deal with.

“So this girl, you gonna see her again?” I ask, as we make our way back upstairs.

“It’s best for her that I don’t, but if she gets that job, I guess it would be unavoidable. Either way, it don’t fucking matter. Ain’t like I can have her.” I can relate to the flair of frustration I see in his eyes. This is a different kind of pain from the one he’s used to. Still, I can’t help but laugh at what he said.

“What’s so fucking funny?” Storm snarls at me, for finding humor in his misery.

“You think you’re the first man around here who thought that? Open up your eyes and take a good look around you. You think I’d be with Gracie if I didn’t think I was good for her?”

The confused look Storm gives me suggests I’m gonna have to explain myself better.

“There are plenty of men out there who would be better for Gracie than I am, but how many of those men would kill for her? And if it came to it, how many of them would die? The only man I can be certain that would be, is me.” I suddenly have the need to have her close. I’ve put my own selfish feelings over trying to reassure her, and when the door from the bar opens and she steps into the foyer, I figure fate wants me to square this shit up.

“Gracie,” my voice comes out weak because when it comes to her, that’s exactly what I am.

She says nothing, just looks me up and down, and the devastation on her face proves she still doubts me. It makes me want to tear down the walls.

“We gotta talk.” When I reach my hand out to grab her arm, she stares down at it coldly, and I notice the bloody fingerprints I’ve marked her with.

“I need some space, Brax.” She tugs herself out of my grip, turning my dirty fingerprints into smears.

“Space ain’t gonna solve this.” It scares me that she doesn’t want to talk. Gracie’s all about the fucking talking.

“You deal with things the way you do, Brax, and I’ll deal with them my way.” She gives me one more disgusted look before she moves on, and watching her walk out the door makes me want to go back downstairs and kill Len-fucking-Jenkins all over again.

“You not gonna go after her?” The dumbfounded look on Storm’s face, and pure anger and frustration, has me grabbing him by the front of his shirt and shoving him into the wall. I pull back my fist, ready to land one on him, and the way he stares back at me so fearlessly makes me pause.

The kid really is tapped.

“No, I ain’t.” I lower my fist and let him go. Then, pulling myself together, I head for the bathroom.

The door rattles when I barge through it, and I go straight to the basin and turn on the faucet. Water runs through my bloody hands, and when I splash some on my face and look up into the mirror at my reflection, it all becomes so fucking clear.

The water droplets that trickle over my skin are tainted red, and my eyes hold no redemption for the blood that’s on my hands. Can I really blame Gracie for thinking that I’d be capable of cheating on her when she knows I’m capable of this?

I'm a monster. It's just taken her this long to realize.

And as much as I want to chase after her and tell her she's wrong, I know the man I'm looking at ain't ever gonna change.



When I step out onto my deck, I ain't greeted with the usual peace I get from waking up this early. I can't hear the birds chirping or the water from the lake lapping against the deck. Instead, I find myself among the chaos.

Jessie's out on his deck with the baby that Mel dumped on us, over his shoulder. He's pacing up and down in just boxer shorts while tapping her back vigorously. Squeal's a few doors up, looking like a zombie as he rocks the double stroller with one arm and rocks another screaming baby in the other. And when I look further on, I see Thorne leaning over his deck rails and searching into the lake.

"Jesus, Squeal, can you not shut them up? I'm trying to get her back to sleep here," Jessie moans at Squealer.

"Oh, yeah, Jess. I know how to shut them up. I just thought this would be way more fun," he shakes his head at him. "What the fuck do you think I'm trying to do here?" he snaps back.

"You know what, big man? I really hope this little problem's yours." Jessie hisses back at him viciously, then glancing through the door, he checks Maddy hasn't heard him and stops tapping the baby's back to give him the finger.

He turns his back on Squeal and tips his chin at me. “Mornin’,” he manages with a sarcastic smile.

“Looks like it. What the fuck is Thorne doing?” I gesture my head over toward his deck, and we both watch him leaning over the rails with a clothes hanger in his hand, trying to fish something out of the water.

“Kid dropped his raggy thingy in there to see if it could swim. Apparently, he can’t sleep without it,” Jess explains, his body still swaying to keep the baby in his arms settled.

“Skid, come over here and give me a hand, will ya?” Thorne calls over, looking like he wants to rip the hair from his scalp, when the kid starts to squawk.

“Listen, I’m gonna get him back. Just please don’t start crying. The last thing we need out here is another crying kid.” He eyeballs Squealer before looking back at me helplessly.

“What the hell happened around here?” I utter under my breath, nodding at Thorne to let him know I’ll be right there.

“So, where’s Riley?” I call out to Thorne. I’m sitting here staring at the kid he’s taken on, eating dry Cheerios while he dries off in the bathroom.

Turns out the only way of getting Raggy bear back was to take an early morning dive.

“She went into town to get stuff for dinner tonight. We’ve got Sylvia coming over,” he steps out of the bathroom in dry clothes, and the way he raises his eyebrows suggests he ain’t happy about it.

“Take it you don’t approve?” I give him an opportunity to talk it out.

“What I don’t approve of, is Riley getting so stressed out over it. For some reason, she feels the need to justify herself to the woman.” He shakes his head in frustration.

“Does Sylvia know about the...?” I pull a face so Thorne knows what I’m talking about. I ain’t sure if they’ve broken the news to the kid that he’s gonna be a big brother yet.

“No, and I think Riley’s scared to tell her,” Thorne takes the soaked, stuffed animal from the table and places it out on the deck to dry in the sun. “He’ll be dry in no time,” he promises Gabriel, who seems to be over all the trauma now that he’s got strawberry milk with his cereal.

“Obviously, this is something Riley feels the need to do, and you’re gonna support her through it because you love her,” I state the obvious, in case he needs a reminder of it.

“You’re damn straight about that,” he grins back at me, lifting the kid up from the chair and sitting him on the couch. He grabs the remote and flicks through the channels until he finds something for him to watch.

“You got any leads on Chop?” He heads back to the table and starts clearing it. Since we found out my brother has been hiding out close, and was connected to the Bastards, we’ve been even more determined to find him. But he seems to have done what he does best and vanished without a trace.

“Nothing. But then that don’t surprise me. I’m fed up with searching for him. But I can’t help wondering what I’ll have to chase, once I catch up to him,” I admit, trying to keep the sadness out of my voice.

I can't close my eyes without seeing the way I found Carly, the day he took her from me, and I doubt even his pain will be enough to make it ever go away.

"Hey, once he's been handled, you may not have anything to chase. But you'll always have us." Thorne looks at me with that serious pout on his face.

"I know that." I fake him a smile.

Watching everyone around me start to settle makes me wonder if I'll ever manage it. I don't think it would be fair to fall in love again, not when my heart will always belong to Carly. I feel no malice watching my club brothers find their happiness, but it's hard for me not to wonder how different things would be if she were still here.

Our kid would be four years old by now, we'd probably have another, or at least one on the way, and Carly would be every bit as happy as I promised her she'd be.

I'll never forget the smile I put on her face that day I told her I was ready to be a father. We were driving back from her folks' house after Sunday dinner, listening to her old Kenny Rogers CD in my truck, and she just blurted it out and asked me when I'd be ready to start trying. I pulled over in the nearest lay-by and told her we could start straight away.

It breaks my heart that she never got the chance to tell me when it happened. Call it sick and twisted, but I've watched that video from the day she was taken from me over and over again. I know it word for word, and despite Maddy offering to make me a cut version of the tape that finishes before the part where my own brother kills and rapes her, I refused. Some days I need to watch that video to the end. It's my fuel for when the time comes that I have to kill the person I spent my whole childhood looking up to.

“You alright?” Thorne snaps me out of my own head, and I quickly shake those thoughts away. There’s a time and a place for them and here, in this happy home, where a new family’s just getting started, ain’t it.

“I gotta go. Rogue’ll be at the garage cursing my ass for all the shit I’ve booked in.” I stand up from the table, ready to leave.

“Thanks for watching him while I took a swim,” Thorne says. “And if you ever wanna talk about shit, you know where I am.”

“Yeah, I do. And the same goes for you,” I think about Tac as I open the front door and get ready to leave. Thorne must miss his best friend. “You just give that girl you’re crazy about what she needs, even if it means having to deal with a batshit, crazy old lady. You’re never gonna regret all the things you give her, but you sure as hell will the things you don’t.” I offer him some advice before heading out and closing the door behind me.

I stop by the clubhouse to grab me and Rogue a coffee before I make my way over to the garage, and when I get there Ella is practically jumping with excitement.

“Morning, Skid,” she nearly knocks me on my ass when she throws her arms around my neck and kisses my cheek as she passes.

“Someone’s happy. What’s gotten into her?”

“On this occasion, it wasn’t Nyx,” Squealer seems a lot more chilled, now both his kids are sleeping, and both Prez and Nyx glare at him with the same filthy look.

“Ella’s going back to school, and Prez just agreed to fund some help at the office, so we have someone to watch the

kids,” Nyx explains.

“I figure with the way things are going around here, we could use some help,” Prez shrugs, then looks across the room to where Jessie is handing over the baby to Shaniya.

“Any news on those results?” I ask. Maddy never put me on the schedule she made, but there’s a chance the baby’s mine, and if she is, I’m gonna have to start learning how to care for her.

The thought of that terrifies me.

“Nothing yet. They said it would take a few days,” Prez answers my question.

“And every man here is touching cloth right now,” Squealer points out, actually sounding serious for once.

“Not all of us,” Nyx pipes up with a cocky smirk on his face.

“As much as I’m happy to hear that, no one likes a smug bastard,” Prez shoots him down, proving that he’s worried, too.

Jessie makes his way over when he’s been signed off duty, and judging by the smile on his face he’s got good news.

“Mads just called. The girl showed up for the interview, and they loved her. Alex ran all the security checks, and they came back clear. She can start Monday.”

“The girl, whose number I gave them?” Storm sounds intrigued when he looks up from stocking the bar fridges.

“Yeah, that’s the one,” Jessie is taken a little off guard by the Prospect’s enthusiasm. We all are. It’s not the kind of reaction we’re used to seeing from Storm.

I pour out two coffees and leave my club brothers to go help Rogue. When I get to the garage and find her talking to Shaniya, I'm surprised at the attention she's giving the baby.

"You good?" I check, hanging up my cut and stepping into my overalls.

"She's just checking her for any signs," Shaniya widens her eyes at me.

"Signs of what?" I laugh to myself, picking up the clipboard and studying the job sheet to see where I can start.

"You know, OCD, sadism, anything generally psychotic," Rogue tucks her blonde hair behind her ears while continuing to examine the baby's face, and Shaniya tries to hide the smile from her face when she glances at me.

I peer over Rogue's shoulder, taking a look at the baby myself. I haven't really had the chance to look at her properly. She's a pretty, little thing and has a huge smile on her face. Anyone who's lucky enough to be her daddy should be grateful.

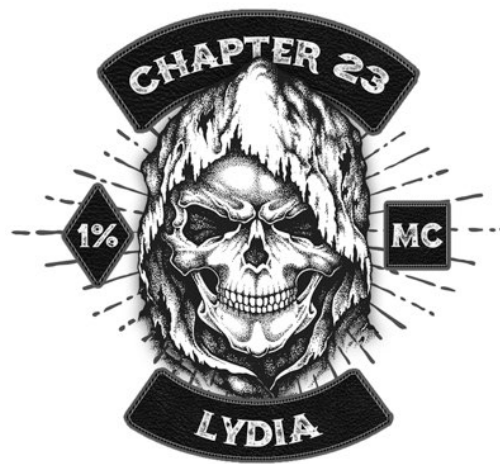
"She ain't Grimm's," I assure Rogue, moving on to get started.

"Oh yeah, and how can you be so sure?" she snaps back at me.

"First off, she's smiling, and I don't think Grimm's got a smile in the gene pool, and secondly, Grimm's smart. He's the closest I've ever met to a fucking genius, and he's definitely too fucking clever to do the dirty on you. Believe me when I say it, Rogue... She ain't Grimm's."

"Well, you better hope Uncle Skid here is right, sweetheart." She talks to the baby in an eerily, soothing voice, "because if he ain't, your daddy will be dead."

“I should go.” Shaniya throws a concerned look at me before quickly lifting up the car seat and heading off, and Rogue raises her shoulders, smiling at me sweetly before getting to work.



I'm rinsing the shampoo from my hair in the shower when I feel his big, rough hands slide around my waist, and I make a relieved sigh when he steps up behind me. Screwy's so much bigger than I am, and when his cock presses into the dip of my spine, I feel it harden against my skin.

"I missed you," his low husky voice whispers into my ear, as one of his hands drops between my legs and the other squeezes one of my breasts.

Screwy's touch brings me an indescribable comfort. No matter where I am or what's happening around me, I'll always feel safe with him.

"I missed you too." Granted he's only been gone a couple of hours, and knowing today's the anniversary of his sister's death, I decided not to ask him where he was going when he left this morning.

Now that he's home, all I want to do is help heal his pain.

His fingers carefully stroke between my legs, building pleasure and making me desperate for more. I reach behind me and pump his huge cock through my palm, and the deep, helpless groans he makes in my ear make me feel so powerful. I rest my head back against his solid body, and when the hand

he had on my chest slides up to arch around my throat, he leans his head over mine and finds my lips.

Screwy has a way of making me so desperate that I want to scream. He knows exactly what he's doing when he teases and edges one of his fingers inside me.

I spin around and push him into the tiles until he gets the hint and lifts me onto him. Then, with his hard cock resting between my legs, I beg him with my eyes to put it inside me.

There will always be a shadow of darkness over Screwy. But I don't wish it away. It's part of him, so I fell in love with it too. And today, with the water running over his body and his wet hair hanging in his eyes, I feel that darkness coursing through him with a mighty force.

He's scared he'll hurt me, but he won't. Screwy could never hurt me. He's my protector, he's my strength, and I want so much to be his salvation.

"It's okay," I nod my head to let him know he can take me how he needs to.

"No, it ain't." When he shakes his head back at me, I rest my hand over his bearded jaw and press my forehead into his.

"You won't hurt me," I assure him.

Screwy spins us around so I'm the one with my back to the wall, and with one of his hands braced against the tiles, and his huge, strong arm anchored around my waist, he slowly lowers me onto him.

I moan with relief as he fills me all the way, and I feel the tension in his eyes as he watches me take it.

"Never leave me," he says the words like he fears them.

“Never,” I reassure him, kissing him hard and savoring the slow thrusts he makes.

It’s a little while later when he comes out of the bathroom drying his hair with a towel, and I lay out the plates for lunch on the table when he sits there in awkward silence.

“Ask,” he speaks in that low, throaty growl as he stares down at his empty plate and waits.

He told me a while ago what he does to mark today. How he goes to Roswell and asks for a name, usually of someone who has evaded the law or done something unspeakable, and Screwy finds the strength to get through the day by putting them to justice.

“Where did you go?” I give into temptation and ask the question.

“I went to the lake. I sat on a rock, and I stared out at the water,” he looks up at me, searching my face for a reaction.

“And then...?” I wait with anticipation.

“Then I realized I didn’t need it anymore. That all I needed was right here. So I came home... to you,” he looks at me with those deep, blue eyes, and I get up and rush toward him, straddling his lap and wrapping my arms around his neck.

“I’m always gonna need some mayhem. I’m always gonna crave the violence, but I don’t want to use it to remember her anymore,” he admits, bringing tears to my eyes.

Happy tears, that Screwy uses both thumbs to wipe off my cheeks.

“I want to spend today appreciating what I got. It’s what Beth would have wanted. You think we could ask Squeal and Alex over for dinner with the kids?” he asks, and although all the hurt is still there, I see a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

“I think that would be perfect.” I smile, knowing that a little more of his broken just got healed.



Storm is distracted. Sure, Ruckus is a hard fighter to beat, but Storm's making this far too easy on him.

I call it, and Storm punches the side of the ring in aggravation as Ruckus jumps out.

"He's good," Ruckus utters under his breath as he passes me, ripping the velcro off his gloves with his teeth.

"That ain't even a scratch on the surface. He's off his game today." I watch Storm pace the ring like a caged, fucking bear and wonder what's gotten into him.

"When were you thinking of heading back?" I ask. Ruckus has been here a few days now, he came to settle Cliff's daughter, but none of us have seen much of her.

From what I've heard, the girl is far from a recluse, so I assume her staying in her cabin is some form of protest.

"I'll head off first thing in the morning. I know Jimmer wants to speak to me before I leave, and I'm pretty sure I know what it's about." He looks up from the weight bench where he's now sitting and raises his eyebrows at me.

It ain't my place to give anything away. I just hope whatever's going on in Long Beach don't involve him. Ruckus

is a good guy, and over the years he's proven to be a good friend, too.

Storm is taking his aggression out on the kick bag now, and I note the way Ruckus watches him.

"He's intense. What's his deal?" he asks.

"You met Thorne's old lady, Riley...? She's his sister," I start to explain. "She got taken from him when they were living on the streets, and he came to us looking for help. There was a time when he thought he'd never get her back."

"I ain't got a sister, but I can imagine that's tough."

"And he was the only one of us there, when that shit happened to my old lady," I admit, swallowing my pride. Shan keeps telling me that what happened that night just can't be forgotten. She says it's good to talk about it and accept that we can't move through life pretending like it never happened.

That don't make it any easier to get the words out, though, and the sad, pitiful look on Ruckus's face right now is exactly why I usually keep 'em contained.

"I gave him a lot of shit over it when it first happened, but it wasn't his fault. I guess this is my way of making it up to him."

Ruckus nods his head like he understands. He knows himself that something happens to you when you're in the ring. Your soul becomes independent from your body. Anything that hurts, mentally or physically, turns numb. For me, fighting has always been an out-of-body experience. Maybe that's why I never lose.

"Kid seems to be doing well under Brax, too. I saw for myself how they handled the 'Len' situation. I think Prez made sure of that," Ruckus huffs a laugh. He ain't a fool, and

he knows that Jimmer ain't one either. The fact he ain't showing any fear convinces me more that whatever's happening on the west coast ain't on his conscience.

It's dinner time when I get back to my cabin, and Shaniya has a huge beam on her face when I open the door. I'm guessing it's because she's got to spend the whole day with the baby, and when I see the little thing sleeping in the bassinet in the corner of the room, I quietly slip out of my boots and creep over to the kitchen to steal a kiss from my wife.

“Mrs. Knox.” I keep my lips pressed to hers and smile against her mouth while my hands squeeze her ass in my palms.

“Shhhh, don't wake her. She had a restless night at Maddy and Jessie's.”

“She did. Jessie's been good for nothing all day,” I get myself a beer from the fridge and sit at the table, and when Shaniya sits herself on my lap and wraps her arms around my neck, I can tell from the look on her face that she wants to have something out.

“I don't like the fact she's getting passed around. It must be scary for her, and I'm pretty sure it's the reason she's not settling,”

“Yeah, it ain't ideal, but it's fair, and Maddy's made it work around everyone's commitments,”

I point out, trying to put her mind at rest.

“Well, I was thinking today, what if I took a little time off from the library so I could take care of her? It's only a few

days until we get the results back, and I'm sure it would suit everyone else to get their free time back," The last thing I want to do is crush the hope on her face, but I can see her getting more and more attached, and she's gonna end up hurting when she has to give this little one up.

"You're not here to suit everyone else, Shaniya," I remind her. It's typical of her to want everyone else to be happy. It's one of the reasons I love her so much.

"I know, but I really like taking care of her, and she's happy here," The smile she gives me is irresistibly cute.

It's so hard to say the word 'no' to her. Despite all this world has thrown at her, Shaniya is the most positive person I know. I could give her the world, and it still wouldn't feel like it was what she deserved.

"She does look happy here," I agree, shaking my head at letting a smile twitch on my lips.

"I wanted to talk to you about something else, too," Now she's looking really serious, and when she starts to chew her lip, I fear what's coming.

"I was thinking of all the outcomes today and was wondering what the club would do if she belonged to Tac?"

Me and Jessie had the same conversation before I hit the gym. We had his son, Hayden, take part in the DNA test, too, so it could be ruled out, but out of all of us, I'd have him down as the most likely.

"You know what will happen. The club will take care of her," I assure her, stroking a hand through her long, black hair. I don't want her worrying about this.

"How, with another roster?" She stares back at me sadly, and I can't help but feel she's got a point.

“If she’s Tac’s, I want us to take care of her,” she’s got that strong look of determination on her beautiful face. “I want her to live here and be loved by us, the way we would our own child. And this isn’t me getting too attached or giving up on us having that child, Troj. This is us doing what’s right. If that sweet, little girl hasn’t got anyone to love her, I know we can do it. We could do it even if we had ten of our own children.”

Her request comes as no surprise, and she should know by now that I’d never deny her a damn thing.

“Yes.”

“Before you shut me down, hear me out...” she pauses from her rant when she notices me smiling. “Did you say yes?” she stares back in shock.

“She can stay here until we find out who she belongs to, and if she is Tac’s, we’ll take care of her.” I watch the smile spread on her lips before she kisses me with them, and as I clutch my wife’s hair in my hands and kiss her deeper, I feel myself fall even more in love with her.



“**B**rax, you’ve had enough.” I drag my brother off the bar, where his head is resting, and lift him onto his feet. “Come on. I’m giving you a ride home.” I nod my head at Frank, to thank him for calling me, as I try to get him out the door.

“I don’t wanna go home. I wanna stay here with my new friend.” Brax rips his arm out of mine and points to the old boy with no teeth, who’s drinking at the bar. The guy shrugs at me, and I take a deep breath and pull together some patience before continuing to try to get my brother to leave.

“You know she didn’t come home again last night?” he slurs, just about managing to stand on his own two feet, and when he creases up his forehead at me like he’s hurting, he starts to wobble.

“You know I know that. She was at my place.” I remind him of the conversation we had this morning.

“I love her, Nyx, and I feel like I’m losing her.” Shit, now he’s talking feelings, he *must* be hammered.

“Let’s just get you home.” I shake my head at Frank when he offers to help me, and with a little brute force, I manage to get my brother out into the fresh air.

“Is she gonna be there?” he asks weakly, and as much as I need these two to sort their shit out, I’m kinda hoping that she ain’t.

“I don’t know. She was at mine when I left,”

“I gotta talk to her. Why is she avoiding me? She’s a fucking councilor, Nyx. Talking’s, like, her favorite thing to do.”

I manage to get him propped against the side panel of the cage and hold him there while I open the passenger door.

“Listen, let me take you home. You can sober up, and I’ll try to convince her to come home in the morning. Right now, you’re not in the place to be having this conversation.”

I’m surprised but relieved that he doesn’t argue with me, instead he lowers his head like a disgraced child and gets inside. I drop him off at his cabin, and after dumping him on the couch, I leave for my place.

The house is quiet, and I creep past Grace, who’s sleeping on the couch, on my way to mine and Ella’s bedroom.

Ella’s sleeping when I get into bed, and I try not to wake her as I slide in beside her. She got so excited today when Prez said he’d take care of the childcare issue. I know it’s been playing on her mind, and I don’t want anything to hold her back. My wife is capable of amazing things, and her starting college next term may make things a little harder, but I know she’s gonna smash it.

“You’re home,” she croaks sleepily, turning her body to face mine and snuggling into my chest.

“I had to give Brax a ride home from town. Frank called from the bar to say he was wasted.”

“Grace really needs to talk to him,” she tells me.

“Yeah, and he really needs to talk to her.” I wrap her up in my arms and hold her tight.

“Ell,” I catch her before she drifts off again. “You haven’t asked me,” I whisper.

“Asked you what?” she yawns.

“If there’s a chance, she could be mine.” I think of all the meaningless fucks I had with Mel before Ella came into my life, and I hate to think that my wife had a notion of doubt that I’d ever betray her.

“I don’t have to ask.” Ella looks up at me with her sleepy green eyes. “I trust you,” she tells me with such sincerity, that my heart feels like it could burst out of my chest.

I grab her face and kiss her lips, filling her mouth with my tongue. There ain’t words that will ever explain to her how much that trust means to me. I’ll just have to spend the rest of my days proving it to her.



My head is thumping so hard I don't want to open my eyes, but when I feel something dig into the center of my chest, they shoot open automatically.

"Wake your sorry ass up!" My brother's wife is standing over me with a furious look on her face, and as I search around me to get my bearings, I realize that I must have crashed out on the couch.

"What time is it?" I rub my eyes to try to get my vision straight.

"It's eight a.m., and time for you to get up and sort your life out," she takes a step back and waits for me to sit up, with her hands resting on her hips.

"What are you doing here, Ella?" Standing up, I scratch at my stubble and head for the kitchen to make myself a coffee. My mouth is drier than Arizona, and the thumping in my head ain't letting up.

"I'm here to talk some sense into you."

"Talk some sense into me? How about you go back and talk some sense into your friend? She's the one accusing me of cheating on her," I don't want to get angry at Ella. She's only

here because she cares, but she doesn't have the first clue how shit it feels to be doubted by the person you breathe for.

“Brax, she's scared,”

“Scared of *fucking what?*” I raise my voice. The frustration keeps building up inside me, and it doesn't matter how many times I release it, it still replenishes itself like a fucking scab.

“Of the fact she's three weeks late, and you don't want to have kids!” Ella snaps back at me, then immediately slams her hand over her mouth. That, and the fact her eyes stretch wide, makes me realize she just fucked up.

“*What?*” I start moving toward her and have to remind myself that this is not an interrogation before I reach out and start shaking her.

“Shit, I wasn't supposed to say that,” she curses herself, while I wait patiently for her to explain what the fuck she's talking about.

“I told her to talk to you about it, but she's convinced that you don't want kids, and she doesn't want to take a test because she's scared it's gonna be positive. You two really need to talk.”

“I gotta go.” Suddenly I'm feeling very fucking sober, and when I head outside to get on my bike and realize it's not there, I recall a vague memory of Nyx driving me home.

“You need a ride?” I turn around, and Ella is standing on my porch waving her keys in her hand, with a clever look on her face.

I respond by rolling my eyes and marching over to the passenger side of her car.

She drives me straight to the clubhouse, where Gracie is apparently having breakfast with Nyx and the kids, and when she pulls up outside and starts walking through the doors, I catch Tawk getting into a cage on the other side of the yard.

“Where ya going?” I call out to him.

“Town, Marilyn gave me another shopping list.” I can see he ain’t impressed, but then Tawk never looks too happy about anything.

“I’ll take a ride.” I feel around in my cut pocket for my bike keys. Since it ain’t here, I figure I must have left it outside the bar in town.

“Sure.” Tawk nods back, and when I turn back to look at Ella, she looks like she’s ready to kill me.

“Brax Marshall, don’t you fucking dare!” Ella warns, and I shrug apologetically back at her as I rush to jump in the cage and ignore the furious yells that come from behind me.

It’s half an hour later when I storm into the barroom, clutching the brown, paper bag tight in my fist. I head directly for where Gracie is pushing her food around her plate and looking like she could burst into tears at any moment. I’m so fucking mad at myself for causing that. I’m mad at her for having any doubt in me and it all feels so overwhelming that I don’t know how to be calm.

When she notices me coming, she looks up, and I figure she can sense the tension coming off me because she looks almost fearful.

“Brax...” Ella starts talking, and I throw her a look that instantly shuts her up before I fix my eyes back on Gracie.

“Come with me.” I take her arm in mine and march us toward the ladies bathroom. Her legs almost have to run to keep up with my long, fast-paced strides.

I slam through the door and shove my boot at all the cubicles to check we’re alone before I push Gracie’s back against the wall and clasp her jaw tight in my hand.

Through all the sadness and the hint of fear, I see that mischievous glint in her eye that she always gets when I take control.

“First off, you need to remove any thought that I would *ever* fucking cheat on you, out of that pretty little head of yours,” the tension in my fingers stiffen and when her bottom lips starts to tremble, it takes everything inside me not to fucking bite at it.

“You are *it* for me, Gracie. Everything. The fucking end game. And the thought of you thinking that I could ever do something like that to you rips me fucking open.” I press my forehead into hers and force the back of her head into the wall behind her, and when she resists against me to nod, I feel a slight fucking relief.

“Secondly, don’t you ever, *ever*...” I emphasize my fucking point, “... keep something as important as this from me again.” Keeping a hold of her jaw, I take a step back and force the brown, paper bag that I’m still clutching, into her chest.

When she glances down, the petrified look on her face tells me she knows exactly what’s inside it.

I soften my grip and try my best to calm my tone.

“Take the test, Gracie,” I whisper, forcing down the lump in my throat and trying not to fucking tremble.

“I can’t... I’m too scared.” Her eyes are brimming with tears and when they start to spill out, I use the pad of my thumb to brush them off her cheek.

“I don’t know how it happened. I took my pills every day, I swear,” she shakes her head and sobs.

“Yeah, well, sometimes these things happen, and I’m fucking scared, too,” I admit.

I’m supposed to be the one holding this all together, and I’m really fucking it up.

“I know you don’t want this, Brax, but...”

“Gracie, I ain’t scared because I don’t want it.

I’m scared because I don’t feel like I fucking deserve it. Every single day I worry I’m gonna mess things up with you. You’ve always been so accepting of what I am and what I do,” I think back to yesterday and the way she looked at me when she saw the blood on my hands. It made me question if she’s lost her tolerance.

“I’m scared I’m not cut out to be a dad, and I’m petrified I’ll fuck it up.” I lay it out for her as clearly as I can, and it ain’t easy to admit.

“So if I am, you won’t be mad?” The hopeful look she stares back at me with, simmers all the anger inside me.

“Now, why would I be mad?” I somehow manage a smile for her.

“Because we didn’t plan it, and I know you like to be in control. Before, when you said you wanted to and then you backed out, I thought that was your mind made up,”

“A lot of things have happened to me in the past few years that weren’t planned, and I’m pretty fucking happy at how they turned out,” I brush the blonde hair, that’s stuck to her tear-soaked face, away so I can get a full view of that beautiful smile she’s making.

“Take the test, Gracie,” I whisper again, pressing my forehead into hers and stroking her cheek with my thumb.

I wait for her to nod before I back away, then I sit my ass on the basin unit while she heads into a cubicle, and wait.

My pulse throbs, my palms sweat, and I’m nervous as hell. But I gotta be strong for Gracie, and when she opens the door and places the white stick on the counter beside me, I give her a reassuring smile. Taking her hand in mine, I position her between my legs and kiss her lips.

“I’m sorry for doubting you,” she pulls away to tell me. “I know you wouldn’t cheat, but I was stressed about this, and I guess I was trying to find problems to distract me from it,”

I nod my head, bringing her hand up to my lips so I can kiss her knuckles. She’s shaking, and I wonder how much time’s left on that fucking stick because all this waiting is driving me fucking crazy.

“I think it’s time.” She breathes nervously, and when she picks up the stick, and the look on her face becomes completely unreadable, I snatch the thing out of her hand and look for myself.

There’s a line in one window, and a plus sign in the other, and I have no idea what that fucking means because I didn’t think to read the damn instructions.

“What does it mean?” I look up at her and see that her expression still hasn’t changed.

“It means, we’re gonna have a baby,” her lips tweak up into a tiny but terrified smile, and I swallow back all my own fear, grab my girl’s jaw and drag her onto my mouth. I kiss her so hard my lips go numb, and I taste the salt in her tears as they seep between them.

Grace pushes her hands into my shoulders to hold me back, her chest rising and falling frantically to catch her breath.

“Wait, how do you feel about it?” she asks, her heart thumping out of her chest while she waits for my answer.

“Honestly?” I keep a deadly serious look on my face. She looks so nervous, but she’s got no reason to be. I may be terrified, but that doesn’t mean I won’t make sure everything’s okay.

“I feel like I want to take you home and make up for all the shit we’ve put each other through over the past few days,” I let the smile I’ve been holding back spread on my face before she throws her arms around my neck and kisses the fuck out of my lips again.

“Well then, what are you waiting for?” she teases.

“We gotta do something first.” Keeping her hand in mine, I lead her out into the barroom to where my brother is sitting with his family, eating breakfast.

Ella’s eyes are scowling at me, but they soften when she notices the smile on Gracie’s face and when her eyes lock onto the stick in my hand, she immediately stands to her feet.

“Was it?” She looks to Gracie, who nods her head enthusiastically as I pass the test I’m holding over to Ella so she can see for herself. Nyx just stares up at me like he got off at the wrong stop.

“You’re gonna be an uncle,” I bring him up to speed. I figure it’s time for me to start looking to him for inspiration cause if my little brother does one thing well, it’s fucking fatherhood.

“I’m so happy for you!” Ella launches herself at Grace excitedly, and when Maddy and Marilyn hear the news, they rush over to get in on the action, too. Nyx stands up and shifts Sophia onto his hip as he comes toward me.

“You good with this, brother?” he asks under his breath, and when my nephew tugs at the bottom of my T-shirt, asking to be lifted, I grab him up and look over to Gracie. She looks the happiest I’ve ever seen her as the girls congratulate her, and when she looks across at me and smiles, I nod my head and grin back.

“I’m more than fucking good,” I tell him.



I call Ruckus up to the lodge. I don't want him to feel threatened by the talk we're gonna have. I want him to feel like he can open up to me. I expect all men who wear the patch to be loyal to their President, but there's a hierarchy, and since I'm at the top of it, their loyalty should lie with me.

"Sup, Prez?" he takes a seat at my kitchen table and waits for me to speak.

"Cliff wasn't too clear about why the girl's here. You wanna clue me in?"

I test the waters a little, to start things off.

"She's been in some trouble, hanging out with the wrong crowd. Wannabe gangsters, that kinda shit. The club took care of it, but in L.A there's always another right around the corner. Prez just wants her to have a break from all the partying."

I nod my head, at least pretending to believe what he's telling me.

"In all honesty, she's been acting up for years. Ever since Aaron left," he admits, and now I feel like we're fucking getting somewhere.

Aaron is Cliff's son and one he was real proud of. We were all shocked when he got patched in, and the first thing he did was trade his Long Beach badge in for a nomad one.

Word spread around the Charters and it aroused suspicion that things weren't all as they seemed. Aaron is currently sitting at the Nevada table and he's a fucking asset. Headstrong, smart, and fearless, he's everything it takes to be a Soul, but he refuses to patch into a Charter. Hell, I've offered him a seat here enough times. Ruckus and Aaron grew up together. They used to be best friends, and I've always wondered if Ruckus knew what made him ride out of Long Beach and never look back.

"You speak to him?" I question, and when Ruckus keeps his lips straight and shakes his head, I can tell it hurts him.

"Well, I know it ain't easy being a President's daughter, and you can tell Cliff from me we'll do all we can to make her feel welcome, but I don't tolerate bullshit, and if she needs to be reprimanded, I won't hesitate," I warn.

"Being honest, I kinda feel for her. She don't get any attention from her family. And she's not allowed any attention from anyone else, if you catch my drift," he raises his eyebrows. "She doesn't make real friends because she's a complete bitch, but she's popular because of the club, and she often gets used for it."

"Sounds like someone I used to know." My eyes glance over the refrigerator to the photo of Hayley and Jessie together. It was taken on her sixteenth birthday, and I wasn't there for it because I was busy helping the Utah boys complete a deal with the Irish.

"What about her sister?" I'm sure Cliff has another daughter, a strong-willed one, if I remember correctly. She

punched Squealer clean off a barstool for checking out her ass a few years ago, when we rode out there on a run.

“Freya,” Ruckus laughs at me. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you, Prez.”

“Try me.” I keep my face deadly serious.

“She ran away with the circus, tightrope-walking kinda shit.” I laugh, but when I see he ain’t kidding, I rub my temples.

“So what you’re telling me is, that your President has no control over his kids. What’s his management on the Charter looking like?”

It ain’t often you see a man like Ruckus look uncomfortable, but that’s what I’m witnessing right now.

“He’s got control, alright. But that don’t mean everyone likes what he does with it.” He crosses his hands on the table in front of him. “Cliff has a put up, or shut up, kinda policy. And he’s lost us some good members because of it.” I can tell he doesn’t want to talk about it, but I need all the information I can get.

“And what about you? Clearly, you ain’t happy. Why do you stick around?”

“Long Beach is my home, and I’m holding out for better days.” I got a feeling there’s more to it than that, and I don’t press him on it.

“Well, there’s always a seat at my table for ya.” I let him know.

“I appreciate that, but like I said, I belong in LA. The last thing I want is a civil war, but know that if one comes, you’ll

find me on the right side of it.” Ruckus stands up and holds his hand out for me to shake.

I take it and squeeze, grateful for his loyalty.

“You know where I am, if you need me.” I tip my chin at him before he heads out the door, and then I step out onto my balcony and look down over my club.

There’s no denying now that intervention is required, but like with all things, I gotta bide my time and collect the facts. Ruckus is right, no one wants a civil war, but if that’s what it takes to protect everything I’ve worked so hard to build, then we go to battle.



“So, did you hear the news?” Rogue lets herself into mine and Thorne’s cabin, sitting down and kicking her feet up on the kitchen table.

“What news?” I yawn. I’ve barely had a chance to wake up.

“You’re not the only knocked-up Nancy on the compound. This place is turning into a fucking stud farm,”

“Morning, Rogue,” Thorne nods his head at her, scratching his head sleepily as he comes out of our bedroom and heads for the bathroom. He doesn’t seem to care that he’s only in his underwear, and neither does Rogue. “Wowsa... he really *is* hot for an oldie!” She cranes her neck so she can check out his ass before he slams the door, and when she catches me staring at her, she winks and smiles.

“You were saying?” I drag her head out of the gutter and back to the point she was making.

“Oh yeah, Brax knocked up Grace, which is no great shock. He practically told the whole club he was gonna do it after we stormed that Verretti cunt’s mansion...” she stops herself abruptly, screwing up her nose awkwardly. “My mouth

can kinda run itself sometimes,” she offers me an apologetic smile.

“That’s great news. Grace will make an awesome mom,” I’ve been seeing Grace a few times a week since I moved in with Thorne. She really helps put things into perspective, and I know I’m not the only person she helps around here.

“Anyway, I thought you might like to know. Now you can moan to her about your morning sickness, and all that other crap,”

“Thanks... I think.” It’s too early in the morning to be trying to figure Rogue out.

“So, how did it go with Sylvia last night?” she asks, trying to hide the fact that she cares. I admitted to Rogue yesterday how nervous I was about telling Sylvia how I planned to move on from Raphael. I’m sure it would hurt any mother to hear that my choice is to erase any trace of her son’s existence from mine and our son’s life.

“She took the news well. I could see it hurt her, but she has little choice if she wants to be part of Gabriel’s life. This is what’s best for him,” I can say that with confidence because seeing the way him and Thorne are together makes me sure of it. I think Sylvia saw that, too. I’ll always have my guard up when it comes to her, but I won’t make her suffer for the sins of her son.

“Good to hear she’s on board. Nobody wants to hurt an old woman,” Rogue nods assertively, “I better get to work.” Rogue stands up, ready to leave, and when that familiar wave of nausea hits me, I let her see herself out, so I can rush to the bathroom for my routine morning throw up.

Thorne's in the shower, and when he sees me hanging over the toilet, he turns off the faucet, wraps a towel around his waist, and gets out to hold my hair back for me.

"You, okay?" he checks, with that concerned look he gets on his face every time I chuck up.

"Yep," I wipe my hand over my mouth and stand back up.

"I should be okay for the rest of the day now. It's definitely getting better," I reassure him, knowing how much he worries.

Thorne always looks super hot when he's fresh out of the shower, and if I wasn't feeling so exhausted, I'd defo be stripping him out of that towel before Gabriel woke up.

"Why don't you go back to bed? You look worn out,"

I don't argue with him and head back to our room. I know I'm not gonna sleep. I've got too much on my mind. The baby that got dropped at the club could very well be Thorne's, and the closer we get to getting the results, the more I'm worrying about it.

I can't help wondering if I'd be capable of loving another woman's child, even if it did belong to Thorne. It's cruel and selfish of me, especially since Thorne is so incredible with Gabriel.

Thorne comes in a few minutes later to get dressed. I hate how he's been avoiding the situation. He doesn't want to talk about it because he thinks it's gonna stress me out, but having it fester in my head without any outlet is driving me crazy.

"I'm heading out to Pueblo to meet up with Dirk and look at some storage property for the club. Do you want me to bring dinner home?" he asks, doing up his belt buckle.

“Have you looked at her yet?” I ask, unable to hold it in any longer.

“Looked at who?” he pulls a face and pretends he doesn’t know what I’m talking about.

“The baby that might be yours,” I stare back, letting him know that this conversation is happening.

“Yeah, I’ve looked at her,” he admits, sitting on the edge of the bed and pulling on his boots.

“And...”

“What do you want me to say? She looks like a baby. We’ll know soon enough, and in the meantime...” he leans over my body and forces me to lay back with a kiss.

“There’s only one baby I want you to focus on,” he plants kisses down my neck and through the center of my body until he gets to my stomach. “Don’t stress over something that probably won’t happen.” He looks up at me, pressing one last kiss into my belly button before he pushes himself off the bed and heads out the door.

I wait for him to leave before I take out my cell and call Maddy, asking her to come and sit with Gabriel. When she arrives ten minutes later, he’s already up and having his breakfast, and I leave them playing together and set off to Shaniya’s cabin.

She messaged everyone on the group chat last night and said she and Troj would be happy to keep the baby with them, until we find out who the father is, so I know that’s where the little girl will be.

Shaniya answers the door with the baby propped up on her shoulder. It looks like it comes naturally to her, and I offer her

a polite smile, not really knowing how to explain why I'm here.

"Come to see if she looks like Thorne?" she asks, and the look of sympathy she gives me makes me wonder if she sees a resemblance.

"Yes," I admit, waiting for her to turn her around and show me.

She takes me by surprise when she places the baby in my arms, and the smiley, little girl beams up at me, showing off her dimples.

"She's cute." I look at the tiny thing and feel nothing but sorry for her. I can't imagine she was treated well by the woman who abandoned her.

"You're not the only person here that's worried. It's a perfectly normal reaction, especially with all your hormones right now." Shaniya smiles warmly.

"I just feel so ridiculous. She's so defenseless." I burst into tears when I finally say the words out loud, and Shaniya quickly guides me over to her couch and wraps her arm around my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, I feel so silly," I admit, unable to stop myself from sobbing. The floodgates are open, and it feels impossible to close them again.

"You're not silly or bad for how you feel," Shaniya tells me, taking the baby out of my arms and placing her on her knee.

"There's a lot of odds in your favor, and Riley, after all you've been through, even if she is Thorne's, I have no doubt in my mind that you'll get through it."

“You’re right, we will.” That’s one thing I can be certain of. It would be tough, but Thorne is reliable and caring. He’d make sure we got through it. I dry my eyes. Now that Shaniya is holding her, she’s looking really happy, and I take her little hand in mine and shake it.

“You never asked for any of this, did you, little one?” I snuffle back my tears and pull myself together. “How could anyone do that to their baby?” I think about Gabriel and the baby I’m carrying, and it makes my heart break for the little girl whose future is so undetermined.

“She’ll be just fine,” Shaniya smiles at her. “No matter what the outcome, she’ll be accepted and loved. She’ll become a part of this crazy-ass family that we’ve all seemed to find our path to.”

“You’re right, and you should bring her to mine so she can play with Gabriel. He needs to get used to being around little ones.” I stand up and get ready to leave. Before I came here, I could never have convinced myself that actually seeing the baby would make me feel better about the situation.

“I’m putting her down for her morning nap, but as soon as she wakes, we’ll be over.” Shaniya beams back at me.



“What ya doin’?” I twist my head around when I hear an unfamiliar voice. The girl who creeps up onto the bank where I’m sitting is the one who came here from Long Beach. I’ve only seen her once before, and that was at Jessie’s wedding. Since then, I assume she’s been stuck in her cabin.

“I’m just thinking,” I shrug.

“Worrying that you’re the father of that baby?” She sits herself down on the grass beside me, uninvited.

“I know she isn’t mine,” I stare out over the reservation and watch the hawks that circle overhead. They’re a breeding pair who have been watching over the reservation for years.

“Oh yeah, and how can you be so sure? I heard the mother was a whore,” she speaks callously

“She was, but I never laid with her,” I explain, feeling agitated when the girl laughs at me.

“You know, if this had happened at Long Beach, there would at least be a wager going,” she adds.

“You’re far away from Long Beach now, little girl,” I remind her. Not really caring if that hurts her or not. I’m not in the mood for company.

“So what’s your story?” she asks, proving that she has resilience.

“I don’t have a story.” I keep my focus ahead of me, refusing to break, and look at her again. She’s pretty, I’m not denying that, but I’ve come to learn that pretty can really, fucking hurt.

“Everyone has a story, and you intrigue me,” she speaks as if I should be honored by that fact

Don’t fucking bite Tawk... I have to remind myself.

“Why?” the word tumbles out of my mouth, and I curse myself for it.

“Well, I figure you came from there, and I’m wondering how you ended up here?” she asks, generally sounding interested. Sometimes, I wonder myself but I wouldn’t change it now. The Souls offer me something I would never have found on the reservation.

“I was meant to marry Shaniya. She came from the reservation too. Her uncle arranged it.” I surprise myself when I take the time to answer her question.

“She’s the one who the hot, fighter guy married last year, right?” she checks.

“That’s the one.” My fingers start ripping at the grass beneath my fingers as I feel the hurt inside me whirl like a hurricane.

“Did you love her?”

“Do you have *any* fucking boundaries?” I snap back, turning my head to cold-stare her.

“Not one,” she owns her shit, and smiles with it.

“I thought I loved her, and it hurt when I lost her,” that’s all she’s getting out of me, and it’s more than I should offer. It’s none of her business.

“So, she’s the reason you’re here?” The girl comes to her own conclusion, and it would be easy to let her leave with it.

“No... I’m here because I killed a man, and I liked how it felt,” I admit, resting my arms over my knees and rubbing my hands together to rid them of the grass.

“And here was me thinking I’d struggle to get you to open up,” she laughs to herself, and although it should irritate me, it doesn’t.

“How about you? What brings you here?”

Now I’ve asked, I realize how much I actually want the answer to it.

“I’m here because my daddy hates me, and he’s a bitter old fuck.” She starts playing with the buckle on her boot, and it draws my attention to her hands. She’s got long, black, painted nails and I find myself curious as to how they’d feel touching me.

“And what about your mother? What does she say about you being sent out here?”

“My mother?” The girl laughs bitterly. “My mother was a whore, the same as that little baby who got dumped on the doorstep’s mom is. My father let my mother keep me because he wanted another son to help him run his empire, and when I came out without a dick, he made clear to my mama that he wasn’t gonna show her any commitment, so she left me behind as a punishment to him.”

“He sounds like a class act.”

“Like he keeps telling me, if I were a puppy, I’d have drowned.”

“He actually tells you that?” I stare at her, unable to believe what I’m hearing.

“It’s his favorite Thanksgiving story,” she shrugs her shoulders and smiles like it don’t bother her, but I can see from her eyes that it does.

“I don’t know how long I’m gonna be here, and I’m not good at making friends,” she admits, staring out at the reservation to avoid making eye contact with me.

“What are you asking?” I study the profile of her face and decide that she’s not just a dangerous kind of pretty. She’s fucking deadly.

“I’m asking if you wanna be my friend,” she finally looks at me again, and her warm, brown eyes burn into mine, daring me to refuse.

“Sure, I’ll be your friend,” I agree, suddenly feeling mesmerized by the girl sitting beside me.

I’ve been attracted to women before. I had some real strong feelings for Shaniya when I thought she belonged to me, and I can’t even think about Abby without my heart prickling.

But never have I felt a strength like the one that’s drawing me to this girl now.

“Willow,” she holds out her hand to me, and when I press my palm into hers, I feel the connection between us root even deeper into my soul.

“Tawk,” I manage to get my name out. Then looking up at the sky, I watch the two flying hawks finish circling the cabins

in the valley below us. They soar closer, coming into rest on the tree branch above us, and I can't help feel that our fate just got set.



I clutch the envelope in my hand and look at the crowd gathered around me. The information I hold in my hand is life-changing for someone here. It could be life-changing for me. Shaniya has the little girl on her knee, and I smile at her while I wait for everyone to fall silent.

There are a lot of pale faces staring back at me. It's sad that none of us really wants this baby to be ours. But whatever the outcome, she'll be taken care of, that's a guarantee.

The room finally goes quiet, and all eyes are fixed on me as I rip open the envelope.

“Anyone else feeling ‘Hunger Games’ vibes?” Squeal pipes up, and when I cold-stare him to warn this ain't the time for wisecracks, I realize that he looks more nervous than anyone. He's got reason to be. One kid's enough for anyone to handle, but three!

Alex's eyes are closed. I can tell she's praying, and when I shift a glance over to Jessie, he gives me a nod to remind me that I have to open up the paper in my hand.

My heart is thumping in my temples as I unfold the paper and read the name that is printed in the 99.9% likelihood column.

The first thing I feel is relief that the name ain't mine, but then as I raise my eyes to the back of the room where the kid's father is casually leaning against one of the beams, I suddenly feel a whole lot of fucking pity, and I'm not sure if it's more for him, or for her.

"I'm sorry, kid." Those are the only words I got, and as all the heads in the room twist to look at Storm, I watch his head shake in denial and his eyes flare with fear.

"No. She ain't mine." He huffs a nervous laugh, still shaking his head as he pushes his shoulder off the beam. Skid goes to him and tries resting his arm on his shoulder, but Storm shoves him away.

"Don't you fucking touch me," he warns, before marching toward me and snatching the paper from my hands. His pupils flick back and forth over the page before he scrunches it up in his fist.

"This is fucking bull-shit!" he points a finger at my face, and Jess immediately stands up and puts himself between us.

"Be smart, kid," he warns.

I notice how Thorne pulls Riley back and shakes his head at her when she goes to stand up. He knows there's nothing she can do or say to calm the kid down right now, and Storm's proved on more than one occasion that he can be unpredictable.

"This is a setup. You're putting it on me because someone here doesn't want to get in the shit with his old lady. That kid ain't mine. I'm telling you now, she's not mine," I watch the strong, fearless kid I've come to know over the past few years fall apart right in front of me. His eyes must be burning from the tears he's trying not to cry.

“She can’t be mine,” he says the words again as if they might become true. And when I look across at Shaniya, my Sgt at Arms Troj, is comforting her as she cries.

Life can be cruel sometimes, and this right here is an example of that.

“Go home!” I order everyone else in the room. The last thing Storm needs right now is a fucking audience.

There’s hardly a sound as the room starts to empty and when Jessie manages to ease Storm down into a chair, Riley and Thorne make their way over to him.

“Liam,” Riley sounds like she’s holding it together as she crouches down in front of him and takes his hands in hers. Storm doesn’t react to her, he just stares down at the hands she’s clutching with anger on his face. “It’s going to be okay. We’ll figure it out.”

“She’s not mine,” He whispers weakly.

When Shaniya stands up and starts walking over with the baby, I shake my head at her. Now’s not the time. Storm needs to process. Troj kisses the top of his old lady’s head before he leaves her and makes his way over to me.

“You want us to take the kid home?” he asks under his breath, looking over his shoulder at the mess Storm’s in.

“I think that would be best.” I pat his arm and send him on his way.

Troj and Shaniya leave, and I notice the grateful smile Riley gives to Shaniya before she walks out the door.

“I’ll get us a drink,” Jessie heads over to the bar.

“It’s going to be okay,” Riley tells her brother again, and I watch all the shock on his face turn to anger.

“Will you stop fucking saying that? How the *fuck* is it gonna be okay?” he stands up tall, flinging the chair back and almost knocking his sister back on her ass. Thorne moves so fast Storm doesn’t see him coming, and Riley gasps when he pins the kid to the wall by the lapels of his Prospect cut.

“Don’t you *fucking dare* take this out on her!” he warns, tensing every muscle in his body.

“She’s trying to help you, which right now you really fucking need. She’s *your* fucking kid, Storm. Now man-up and figure out how you’re gonna handle it.” Thorne shoves him one more time before releasing him. Storm slowly slides his back down the wall and lands his ass on the floor, staring expressionlessly in front of him as he takes all that in. Thorne leaves him to it, heading over to check his old lady’s okay.

“I’m fine,” Riley assures him, and when Jessie returns from the bar with a bottle of Jack and four glasses, we all stand together staring at the poor fucker, and having no idea what to say.

“I only fucked her twice, and each time I wore a condom. I’m not fucking stupid.” Storm is still staring at a spot on the floor in front of him like it’s got all the answers. Jessie pours him out a shot, takes it over, and sits down beside him.

“Neither was Mel. I’ve known the girl for a long time, and she was desperate to be someone’s old lady.” He hands him the shot, and Storm immediately knocks it back.

“If you want, we can do the test again, but those results are probably gonna come back the same, so you might as well start facing up to it now.” I can’t help feeling proud of how Jessie’s handling this. It proves that all my instincts have been right. He’s gonna make a great leader someday.

“How the fuck am I supposed to face up to a little girl? I’m twenty-four years old!” He turns his head and looks at Jessie so helplessly.

“I don’t know, kid, but you’ll figure it out. And know that you got everyone here to help you do it.”

Storm presses his head back at the wall and looks up at the ceiling. “I can’t do it. I just can’t.”

The Adam’s apple in his throat sticks out as he swallows, and when Riley unwraps herself from Thorne’s arms and moves over to sit on the other side of him, he lets her take hold of his hand.

“You have to do it, Liam. You got a little girl who depends on it.” she smiles sadly.



I t's seven am when the baby wakes up, and pulling her out of her crib, I get her into bed with us. Troj is still sleeping soundly beside me, he always skips his morning run on a Sunday to stay in bed with me. And as I sit the happy, little girl on my stomach and rest her back on my knees, I can't help wondering what will become of her now.

Storm's proved to everyone how strong he can be physically. But emotionally, he feels weak. I understand better than anyone else here, why. What we went through together, the night Hawker took us, will remain with us for life. We may choose to channel our pain in different ways, but we will forever be tied by it. Now, Storm is gonna need to be stronger than ever, and I've already made a vow to myself that I'll do whatever it takes to help him.

"Come on," I whisper. "Let's go meet your daddy," I move out of bed slowly because if I wake Troj, he'll tell me this is a bad idea and that it's too soon.

After getting us both dressed, I place the baby in the stroller that Ella lent me, and I push her down the track that leads to the cabins. I stop when I get to Storm's porch, lift her out and step up to the door to knock.

It takes him a while to open it, and when he does, he looks dreadful. I see how scared and overwhelmed he is, as he looks at her. It's that same vulnerability I saw the night we endured hell. I want to cry for him, but I can't. I have to be strong.

"She doesn't have a name," I tell him, stroking my hand through the tiny wisps of hair on her head, before I kiss her there.

"Shaniya.... I can't."

"You can!" I interrupt him firmly. "She's yours, and she's beautiful, and she needs someone to take care of her." I hand her over, and when he takes her in his arms, he stares at her helplessly.

"I'm not what she needs. She needs someone who knows how to look after her. You should take her. Troj told us what you were gonna do if she was Tac's. You could still do that now."

I shake my head at him and smile sadly, because as much as I'd have loved to have become this little girl's mother, I know that's not an option now.

"If Tac had been her father, we would have stepped in because she didn't have a family. But she does. *You're* her father. And I get how scared you are, but you are all she needs. I can't raise your child, Storm, but I can help you. You have a sister who will help you. Everyone here wants you to succeed at this."

"Shaniya, can you hear what you're saying?" He shakes his head at me. "I've done things that can't be taken back. I keep doing those things because they make me feel better. I can't stop. She deserves so much better than me."

“You know Brax is gonna be a dad, and it’s not gonna change what he does. I was *there*, Storm. I saw what happened, and I understand why you need to do what you do. Out there you get to be Storm, and here you can be this little girl’s dad.”

“The best thing I can do for that little girl is put her up for adoption.” Any hope I had of getting through to him disappears when he shoves her back at me and slams the door, before I can argue.

The loud music he puts on vibrates the floorboard under my feet, and I huff a defeated sigh before I strap the poor, little thing back in her stroller.

“He just needs time.” I had no idea Riley had been watching, and when she steps off her porch to come toward us, she bends down to the baby and makes a fuss of her. “I guess you got me for an auntie, baby girl,” she smiles at her warmly.

“Me and Thorne were talking last night. It’s gonna take him a while to adjust, and we can’t expect you and Troj to turn your lives upside down. We’ll take her in while he does,” she stands up and tells me.

“Are you feeling up to that?” I ask her, knowing how much she’s been suffering with the early stages of her pregnancy.

“She’s my niece. She should be with family,”

“We’re all family,” I remind her, and the smile she gives me back is a relieved one

“I don’t know how I’m gonna get through to him, but I will. I’m not letting her be put up for adoption, me and Liam spent years dodging the system. He knows better. He’s just not seeing sense right now.” Riley looks worn out and on the brink of tears, so I wrap my arms around her and hold her tight.

“How about me and you both work together on this? Me and Troj can keep her with us, and when I need to work or when you wanna spend some time getting to know her, she can be with her auntie Riley. We’ll get him there.”

Riley nods her head in agreement. “That sounds like a good plan to me,” she smiles.

“Let’s give Storm a few days to let this sink in before we overwhelm him,” I suggest, and we both look up to greet Maddy when she steps out of her cabin door and walks over to join us.

“I had a lot of scenarios going on in my head. But this one threw me sideways,” she admits.

“Has anyone tried talking to him?”

“Just did, no luck,” I tell her, it’s sad that no one here will ever understand Storm’s self-doubt, but that’s Storm’s story to tell, not mine. I promised him I’d keep what happened to him that night a secret, and I will. But I’ll also make damn sure that it doesn’t ruin him.



“I need to talk to you,” Brax is waiting for me outside the clubhouse when I park my bike. And when he grabs me by my cut and drags me around the side of the building, I wonder what the hell’s wrong.

“What’s the...”

“I need you to tell me how you do it,” he snaps, dragging his hand through his hair and seeming on edge.

“Do what?” It’s too early in the morning for this shit, and it’s a fucking Sunday. I only came down here because Prez wanted to speak to me and Brax.

“The sex stuff.” He lowers his voice, checking around us in case there’s anyone around.

“You just knocked up your old lady. Do you really have to ask?” When I laugh at him, he stares back at me like he wants to punch me in the face.

“That’s the problem,” leaning forward, he talks through his teeth at me. “Every time I go to, you know, that’s all I can think about. It seems different now. Like, she was precious before but..” He eases back and kicks at the dirt.

“Did you just use the word fucking *precious*?” I check, trying to figure out who the hell I got standing in front of me.

“Now’s not the time to be mocking me, Nyx. I got Gracie at home, probably thinking all kinds of shit, and I need to fix it,”

“Well, can you get it, you know...” I stare down at his junk, awkwardly.

“Course I can get it fucking hard! I’m with *her*. It’s constantly fucking hard. It’s just the way we usually... I’m not used to having to think about being careful, if you know what I mean,”

It’s definitely too early in the morning for this.

“You know you don’t have to be that gentle? And I gotta warn you, bro, you’re gonna hit a phase soon where sex is pretty much *all* she’s gonna want. And if she’s anything like Ella, careful is not gonna be a requirement.”

My brother’s eyebrows lift in shock, and I realize we’re both guilty of oversharing.

“I just need to know how you get past it.” Brax taps his boot to the ground impatiently.

“You just man-the-fuck-up. I mean, don’t go throwing her into any walls or whatever shit you guys play at, but you’re not gonna hurt her,”

“Okay, I got this.” Brax nods bravely, like he’s psyching himself up for something. Then when he marches off toward his bike, I call him back.

“Hey, where are you going? Prez wanted to talk to us,” I remind him.

“I’m going to man-up. Tell Prez I’ll catch up with him later.” I shake my head and laugh, as I watch my brother hop on his saddle and pull off out the yard.

I head straight for the members-only bar, where I know Prez will be waiting. He seems a lot less stressed now he knows the father of that baby ain’t him, but we all know that outcome is far from ideal.

“Where’s your brother?” he asks, sipping at his espresso and lighting himself a cigar.

“He had a situation to take care of at home, says he’ll catch up with you later.”

I’m surprised when Prez nods his acceptance.

“You can pass on the message. I wanted to speak to you both because I think you’re the kind of influence Storm is gonna need. He looks up to Brax, and you know yourself how Brax is gonna be going through some changes now Grace is in the family way. They can adjust together.”

“Makes sense,” I agree, lighting up a cigarette for myself.

“And as for you.” He pauses and takes a breath.

“Well, you’re just about the best example of a father there is.” He shifts his eyes away from me when he says that, and I have to swallow the lump it puts in my throat.

“I don’t praise you on it often because your head’s big enough. But what you do for my girl and those babies... it’s something to be proud of, son,” His deep, raspy voice vibrates in my chest.

“Thanks, Prez,”

“I’m ashamed to say I learned too late in life what a blessing it is to be a father. I don’t want Storm making that

same mistake,”

“We’ll do what we can,” I assure him, knowing I can speak for Brax, too. He’s Storm’s sponsor, and I know he’s got a lot of time for him.

“And while I’ve got you alone. I want to know how much the college fees are for Ella,”

“I’ll cover it. The studio’s doing well, and I put by most of my cut from the job we did for the Russians last month.”

“That wasn’t the question I asked,” he growls,

I blow a heavy cloud of smoke into the air.

“I can take care of her, Prez. You’re helping with the childcare situation and that’s already a huge help,”

“I know you can take care of her, Nyx, you’ve proved that, but I’m asking you to allow an old man a little pride.

Growing up, I never got to give her anything. I want to give her this,” The way he frowns back at me suggests it ain’t up for negotiation.

“When the bill comes, I’ll get it to ya.” I promise.

“I’d appreciate that.” When he tips his chin, I figure he’s done with me, so I head out the door and into the barroom.

It’s still early, so the breakfast hasn’t been laid out yet, but I head over to the coffee decanter and pour myself one.

“You’re up early,” I pass Hayden, who’s sitting alone at a table staring across the room at Paige. It’s not the first time I’ve caught him looking at her, and I can understand why. Paige is different from the other whores, and it’s not just because she’s made her pussy off limits. Her manners are different. She makes time for our girls, and in return they trust

her. Ella's left the kids with her on more than one occasion, and that's a fucking big deal.

"I like it when it's quiet," he admits, still not taking his eyes off her. She's busy vacuuming the floor, and as he watches her so intently, I'm tempted to ask what he's thinking.

"You could try talking to her?" I suggest, and when he turns his head away from her to look at me, he looks real pissed off.

"She wouldn't want to hear anything I gotta say," he tells me, making me wonder if he hasn't already tried, and been rejected.

"Listen, we got a pick-up happening tonight over in Fountain. You want in?" I ask, knowing that he's desperate to sink his teeth into some club work. Hayden was a fully patched member of the Bastards, so this Prospect probation can't be easy on him.

"Always," Hayden places his eyes back on the pink-haired girl, who seems oblivious to the fact she's got all his attention.

"Cool, wear something you don't mind getting ruined." I tap him on the shoulder when Marilyn starts shifting trays out of the hatch, because I promised my wife I'd take her breakfast in bed.



I'm just getting out of the shower when I hear the front door slam, and it's closely followed by the thundering footsteps coming up the stairs.

"Gracie!" Brax calls out my name so desperately that I panic. Quickly wrapping myself up in a towel, I pull open the door to see what's happened.

"What's wron...?"

He doesn't give me a chance to finish asking. His hands grab at my face, and his lips slam hard into mine. He breathes me in through his nostrils, and I feel the tension in his fingertips.

When he releases me from his grip, he moves fast to shrug out of his cut and pull his top over his head. Then he gets right back to kissing me, like we've been starved of each other.

He rips the knife sheath off his belt and throws it on the floor. Unbuckling his belt and lifting me off my feet, so he can carry me over to the bed.

He doesn't throw me at the mattress the way he usually does. Instead, he places me down carefully, lowers his body down mine, and puts his tongue to work between my legs.

I raise my hips to get more of it, and when he flicks it fast against my sensitive flesh, I grip at the sheets and brace myself for what's coming.

It doesn't take long for my toes to curl and my stomach to flip. The heat that's built up inside me reaches its limit, and the loud moan I make gets stifled when Brax climbs back up my body and forces his cum-soaked tongue into my mouth.

"You gotta talk to me, Gracie, tell me if I'm hurting you," he growls, holding on to the headboard with one hand, while taking his cock out with his other.

"That feels good," I tell him when he starts to stroke it between my legs. His solid tip teases between my pussy lips before he pauses at my entrance, and I want it inside me so much I could scream for it.

He starts to move his hand up my body, and when he goes to take hold of one of my tits, I grab at his wrist.

"I'd avoid those if I were you," I warn. The past few days my nipples have been so sore I've wanted to rip them off, and the thought of Brax squeezing them makes me flinch.

"Okay," he nods, sliding his hand up behind my ear as his cock pushes inside me.

He moves steadily at first, staring into my eyes with that intensity he always gives me when we're together like this. When we first got together, I wondered if it would last, and here we are three years on, still just as desperate for each other as we were then.

"This okay?" he checks, his forehead creasing with concern, and when I nod back at him and smile, his muscles relax, and his hips thrust a little more loosely.

I sink my teeth into his shoulder when he brings me to that brink again, and he fucks me harder, making sure my orgasm rides out until he reaches his own climax.

“Shit, Gracie!” I feel him tense, his fingers gripping at my hair as he looks down our bodies and watches his cock pulsing inside me.

“You both good?” he checks, when he finally looks up at me and catches his breath.

“Yeah, we’re good.” I laugh, watching his grin raise his cheeks before he drops his head into my neck and lets out a long, deep sigh of relief.

“You should eat. I’ll make you something.” When he goes to get up, I pull him back onto me.

“I already ate.” I snuggle into his body and hope he hasn’t got a lot to do today. It seems like forever since we spent time together.

“And you’re sure you’re alright? Nyx said it was safe and all, but I don’t know if he understands quite how hard we go at it sometimes.”

“From what I hear, your brother goes at it quite hard himself,” I inform him.

“It scares me what you girls do with your free time.” Brax looks slightly disturbed, as he stares back at me.

“I’m no expert, but from what the girls have said, we can just go on as normal,”

“Without the nipple biting,” he reminds me, with a cute smile on his hard-assed face.

“Oh trust me, if you bit them right now, you’d know about it.” I go to fix the towel, that’s come loose around me, but

Brax stops me, opening it back up to expose my stomach. When his hand gently rests just below my belly button, it makes everything feel real.

“You okay?” I ask. Brax has certain expressions that I find unreadable, and the way he’s focusing his hand is one of them.

“There’s a little person in there,” he says, his brows knitting together like he’s confused by it.

“Yep,” I laugh, “and it won’t be little for long. I’m gonna get fat, and pretty soon we’ll be limited to what positions we have sex in, that’s even if you’re gonna want to have sex with me because...”

Brax raises his hand from my stomach and grips my chin, forcing me to look at him.

“Shut up, Gracie,” he smashes his lips hard onto mine.

“I’m an over-possessive, territorial asshole, and if you had any idea how obsessed I am with the fact you’re carrying my kid inside you right now, you’d be worried about way more than getting fat,” he warns, kissing me again. When his hand slides back down my body, avoiding my tits on its journey and resting back over my flat stomach, any worries I had about this being bad for us disappear.



I may have been separated from my sister for a while, but I know exactly what she's playing at when she bursts through my door carrying the baby car seat in one hand, and holding Gabriel's hand with the other.

"You haven't left this cabin in days," she places the car seat on the table and starts to pull back the curtains. "You're living in a dump," she tuts, opening the patio doors to let in some fresh air. My eyes adjust to the light before I roll them, and then lifting up the bottle of Jack that's by my feet, I unscrew the top and knock it back.

"Pull your shit together, Liam!" Riley snatches the bottle off me, and I snarl at her. "And don't you *dare* look at me like that. I've given you some time to get your head around this, but I'm losing my patience." She gags when she picks up the ashtray from the table beside me, and empties it in the trash can.

"There ain't enough time in the world for me to accept this, Riley. I don't want her." I avoid looking over to where she is because I know how fucking harsh that sounds, and I hate myself for it.

Riley looks over to where Gabriel is playing, and it must be to check he's not watching because she slaps me hard

across the cheek.

“Well, tough shit Liam, because that little girl never asked to be born,” she hisses.

It proves she’s some kinda fucking psycho when she pastes a smile on and heads over to join her little boy on the couch. I watch her pick up the remote and point it at the TV, putting on cartoons and leaving the baby asleep on my kitchen table.

I head into the bathroom to freshen up. Riley’s right about one thing. I can’t hide myself away forever. I need an outlet to channel all this anger.

When I come out of the bathroom, I half expect to find them all gone. But Riley’s still there, giggling at something the fucking cartoon cat just did with Gabriel.

I pass through to my room and put on some fresh clothes, and when I head into the kitchen to make myself a coffee, I hear the kid starting to stir in her seat. Riley doesn’t turn her head, and at first, I wonder if it’s because she hasn’t heard her yet. But when the fidgeting turns into full-on squawking, it becomes obvious what she’s doing. I ignore it for a while. My sister may be stubborn, but there’s no way she’d make a child suffer. You only have to see the way she is with her own son to know that.

But when more time passes and she still doesn’t show any acknowledgment, I start to panic.

“Riley,” I call out to her over the screaming, and when she slowly turns her head, I give her a ‘what the fuck’ look back.

“Oh, that...? Yeah, that usually stops when you pick them up and give them what they need,” she shrugs, before turning her attention back to the TV.

It infuriates me, and when I turn back around and see the kid's agitated, red face, it only makes me madder at Riley for using her to try to teach me a lesson.

I move closer to the couch and lean over her shoulder, on the opposite side to where Gabriel is.

"I ain't a fucking hamster in your little experiment, Riley," I warn, heading out the door and slamming it behind me.

I've barely gotten to my bike when she chases after me, and when I turn around, she's got the baby in her arms, proving my earlier point.

"Our mom would be ashamed of you." She narrows her eyes at me harshly, and I look away, kick starting my bike, and speeding off before she tries to throw anything else at me.

When I get to the clubhouse I feel everyone's eyes on me. I can't decide if it's pity or fucking disappointment they're all judging me with, and when I take a seat at the bar, I really hope they're all gonna keep those thoughts to themselves and leave me the hell alone.

"Tough day?" Paige asks, taking a glass from the rack and filling it with whiskey. Prospects usually have to serve themselves, but I'm guessing she can sense what a shit mood I'm in.

I don't answer her, just knock it back and hope she keeps them coming.

"You wanna talk about it?" She tips her head at me, trying to be cute. She does that when she's taking you to the back of her throat, and I swear the way her crystal, blue eyes scrape at your soul is her fucking superpower.

"Do you wanna suck my dick?" I laugh spitefully, and feel no guilt when she looks a little hurt.

“I was just trying to be friendly,” she shrugs.

“Yeah well, I’ve learned my lesson with fucking, friendly whores. The last thing I want to do is fucking talk to one now.” I snap, and when I watch those blue eyes look over my shoulder and swell with worry, I feel something tug at me from behind and drag me off my stool.

I end up on the floor.

“Scrap!” Squealer calls out as Hayden lifts me up off the floor and knocks me back down again, when he cuffs me in the jaw. I manage to get up but stumble backward and shake my head, wondering where the fuck this is coming from.

He manages to get another one on me, so I drop my body and run at his waist, spearing him into the bar and sending stools and glasses crashing everywhere. He may have caught me off guard, but he’ll regret it now.

I slam my fist into his face, over and over, until I feel myself being dragged away. Nyx and Brax hold each of my arms, and I fight against them to get back to him.

Tac’s son proves he’s got some fucking balls because he stands up and comes toward me.

“Call her a fucking whore again and see what fucking happens,” he threatens, pointing his finger at my face. I stare back at him fearlessly. The cunt’s lucky Nyx and Brax still got hold of me, or he’d be eating the toe of my fucking boot. Nyx quickly lets me go, stepping between us and forcing him back.

“Enough,” he warns.

I wipe my thumb through my split lip and snarl at him sarcastically. I want him to come at me again. I want to make something fucking hurt that ain’t me.

“Come on,” Brax tugs at my shoulder, dragging me out to the foyer.

“What that *fuck* was that?” he shoves me against the wall when we’re alone.

“You saw yourself. He came at me,” I defend myself, ain’t no one else gonna.

“Yeah, because you were being a cunt to Paige,” Brax argues.

“I didn’t say anything that wasn’t true. Ain’t my fault he’s got something for her, and doesn’t like the fact her mouth’s everybody’s cock pocket. Maybe if he hates it so bad, he should do something about it.”

“You know what Storm, if I were you, I’d be focusing on your own problems. Shaniya and your sister have been taking care of that baby girl of yours for a few days, now. I think it’s time you started pulling your weight.” He hits me with that tough, judgemental glare of his, but I’m too fucking numb to give a shit.

“Her mother dumped her. What’s wrong with me doing the same?” I shrug. And I feel the full wrath of Brax’s anger when his huge fist smashes hard into my face.

“You’re being a selfish cunt,” he warns, “and I’m this close...” he leaves a small gap between his finger and thumb when he pinches them together “...from stopping myself giving a shit.”

I shake my head at him, feeling my cheek throb from his knuckles.

“This ain’t about what her mother did. This is about how you handle it. You. Her *fucking* father!” He shoves his finger hard into my chest, to hammer in his point. “Yeah, it’s scarier

than fucking death, and yeah, it's gonna be fucking hard. There are gonna be points when you feel like you're drowning, but you're gonna keep yourself on the surface because your life don't fucking matter anymore. You're not important. That little girl, whose mom thought dropping her at the gates of hell would bring her a better life than the one she could offer, is all that you need to concern yourself with from this point forward. Pull your head out of your fucking ass, Storm." He shakes his head at me like I've disappointed him, before thundering off toward his bike.



“You want me to call the Doc?” Nyx dabs at my face with some cotton balls and alcohol. It stings like a fucking bitch, but I don’t show it.

“Nah. It’s fine,” I shake my head at him and place the ice, that’s wrapped in a bar towel, back on my cheekbone.

“You know, Troj’s old lady is pretty good at stitches. She could tack a few in that eyebrow. It looks pretty deep.”

“It’s fine,” I assure him.

The door knocking interrupts us, and when Paige steps inside the rutting room where Nyx bought me to clean me up, I feel my chest squeeze.

“I just came to see if you were okay?” She looks down at the floor timidly. The pink hair and the make-up are just a disguise. She’s still that vulnerable, scared little creature I remember.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Nyx raises his eyebrows at me, before standing up and heading out the door.

It’s the first time since I showed up here that we’ve been alone together. We’ve been avoiding this moment for weeks, and now that moment is here, neither of us say anything. Paige

takes a seat on the bed and keeps her eyes focused on the floorboards like she fears looking at me.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” she eventually speaks, but she doesn’t look up.

“He shouldn’t have called you a whore,” I move the ice from my face and place it on the mantelpiece next to where I’m sitting.

“It’s what I am,” she shrugs, and when her pretty, blue eyes finally raise to meet with mine, they strike me like fucking lightning.

Her words make me angry, and I want to make her take them back.

“We both know that’s not true. You’re not a fucking whore, and if I hear you, or anyone else here, say that again...”

“You’ll do what?” She raises up her shoulders and stares back at me like a fucking temptress. “Hayden, between these walls, that’s what I am, and it’s much better than what I was out there,” Her voice is laced with the agony she’s suffered, and I won’t pretend it doesn’t fucking cripple me.

“You don’t need to be here anymore. They can’t hurt you. The Bastards are finished.”

“Are they really all gone?” she checks, shifting on the mattress like she’s trying to battle the memories out of her head.

“The whole Charter,” I assure her.

“And what about the other Charters?”

“They didn’t even know you existed, nor did Chop. Everyone from my old Charter thought you were dead.” It’s

the truth, and I hope that can put her mind at rest.

I get up from my chair and move to stand in front of her, then hooking my finger under her chin, I push it up so she has to look at me.

“Promise me you won’t tell them,” she begs, blinking back her tears.

“I promise.” It’s so tempting to slide my fingers over her lips, the girl’s gotten even more beautiful with age, and when her eyes lower to the front of my jeans and her fingers start to fumble at my belt, I have to swallow down the desire I got to let her continue.

“No,” I slam my hand over hers and shake my head at her firmly.

“You don’t want it?” She rubs her pink-stained lips together and pierces me with her eyes.

I need to prove to her that I ain’t the weak Prospect she remembers from all those years ago. I may only be nineteen, but I’m a man now. I’ve got the blood on my hands to prove it.

Those pretty eyes of hers bulge in shock when I wrap my fingers around her neck and pull her up to my level. It would be so easy to touch her lips with mine and own that mouth that she’s made so filthy, but I won’t, not while she continues to let them use her.

“Oh, I want it,” I assure her, pressing my nose against hers and tightening my fingers, so she knows exactly how fucking much.

“But not like this. My promise to keep your secret comes for free. You’re not a whore and I ain’t gonna treat you like one.” I release her and quickly storm toward the door while I still have my morals intact.

“Did you kill him?” Her question stops me from opening it, and when I turn back around, she looks almost fearful of my answer. I didn’t realize until I came here what effect my decision that night had caused for this club. I was a boy back then. The Souls were nothing to me but our enemy and I could never have predicted that I’d be in the situation I’m in now.

“I had to,” I inform her, and as I watch her slump back onto the mattress and put her head into her hands, I wonder if my words just brought her relief or pain.

Whatever it is, I leave her with it. She doesn’t need any more details because, whether or not she knows what my actions caused for the people we now live among, I won’t have it be on her conscience. It’s bad enough it being on mine.



I look down so I can watch her pussy bounce on and off my cock, her fingernails dig deep into my chest where she's steadying herself, and I can't believe she's my fucking wife.

"I'm coming, Jessie," her desperate little whisper gives me chills, and with her eyes squeezed shut and those nails embedded deeper into my skin, she looks like a fallen angel. I thrust up from beneath her, clutching at her ass cheeks and spreading them apart. She can't scream, she's too breathless, and her sweet, little pussy squeezes tight at my cock when she reaches her high. It coaxes me to get there with her. And I dig my fingers into her tight, little ass as I come deep inside her.

"Now that's why I married you, VP," she collapses on top of me with an exasperated sigh of satisfaction, snuggling against my chest and closing her eyes with my cock still inside her.

I rest my chin on top of her head and stroke my hand up and down her bare back.

It's hard to believe that just a few hours ago I slit a man's throat with it. But that's a part of me that will never change.

My heart may have softened, but that only means I have to be more ruthless. There's so much more at stake now and not

just for me, but for all my club brothers. Protecting the town where we choose to grow our family has never been more important.

I can tell Maddy's sleeping now, her body's become heavier, and I can feel her shallow breaths against my chest. So when my cell starts to ring, I carefully stretch over to the nightstand and manage to grab it without disturbing her.

The number that comes up isn't stored, but I answer it anyway.

"Hello?" I keep my voice low.

"Miss me, baby?" I recognize the voice straight away, and it instantly gets my back up.

"Mel, where the *fuck* are you?" I whisper-yell down the phone. This fucking bitch is a constant test of my patience.

"I assume you got my gift," she sounds so pleased with herself, and it makes me want to cause her physical harm.

"Yeah, we got it. There were plenty of other ways you could have dealt with this." I hiss furiously at her, for what she's put everyone through the past few days.

"Who turned out to be the father? I'm assuming that smart, little bitch of yours wanted to rule you out of the equation, so you got tested?" Her snide laugh goes right through me.

"Maddy never doubted me," I assure her, squeezing my arm around my girl a little tighter.

"Why are you calling, Mel?" I push her to the point. I can only assume this has something to do with money.

"I'm not as heartless as you think, Jessie. I left her with you because I can't take her where I'm going, and I know she'll be taken care of. I need to sign parental rights over to

whoever her father is before I leave. I can't have people looking for me once I'm gone. And you may not think I deserve it, but I'd really like to see her one last time before I leave." She sounds a little desperate, but that makes no difference to me.

"Go fuck yourself." I hang the phone up on her. It makes me shudder when I think there was a time when I fucked that sick bitch.

"Who was that?" Maddy stirs sleepily, and since I figure she probably heard most of the conversation anyway, I decide to be honest.

"It was Mel."

Maddy sits bolt-upright and stares at me with wide eyes.

"What did she want? Why did she call you? Did she ask about the baby?"

"One thing at a time, darlin'," I try to ease her back down, she's gone from zero to a hundred in a matter of seconds, but it doesn't surprise me. She never switches off.

"Sounds like she's going somewhere. She wants to see the kid one more time before she leaves, said something about signing over her rights or some shit," I explain.

"Yes. That's exactly what we need her to do," Maddy looks relieved.

"Well, I told her to go fuck herself, there's no way she's getting a second look at that kid, papers or no papers. You can take care of all that legal shit. Just do your thing."

"Jessie, it's not that easy, Mel knows about the things I've done for this club. If we do it without her consent, and she ever changed her mind, the first thing she would do is claim

the papers weren't legal. She could rat me out, and if it went to court..."

"That ain't gonna happen," I can't even let her finish that sentence. I already hate the fact that what Maddy does for the club comes with its risks.

"If she signs those papers willingly and we can get a witness or some kind of photographic evidence, this can't come back at us. We need those papers, or she could walk back into that baby's life anytime she wants," she explains.

"Well, she sounds like she's in a hurry to get away, so I don't think her coming back here is gonna be a problem. Get back to sleep, darlin'," I kiss her temple before I get out of bed and pull on my jeans.

"Where are you going?" She crawls to the edge of the bed.

"To take a slash and have a smoke," grabbing her shoulders, I pull her onto me so I can kiss her properly.

"Go back to sleep, and don't worry about Mel. She's never coming back. She wouldn't be that stupid." I'm about to head out the door when Maddy calls my name, and when I turn back around, she has that look on her face. The one that she must have figured makes me weak, because it works every fucking time.

"We need to do this right. There's a little girl's future on the line," I stare up at the ceiling and sigh.

"I'll call Mel in the morning and arrange somewhere to meet. I'll get your papers signed." The tiny, victorious smile she makes back at me has me tempted to pull her legs from under her and take her all over again.

"I'm coming with you." Her voice is assertive as I move back to being close to her.

“No, you’re not,” I flick my nose against hers.

“Jessie, that’s not up for negotiation. You said she wants to see the baby before she leaves, and she may not deserve that privilege, but right now, she holds the cards.”

“You know I can be persuasive.” Sometimes I think Maddy forgets who I am and what I do around here.

“Yes, but like I said, we’re doing this right.”

“And this has nothing to do with the fact it’s Mel?” I tilt my head as I question her.

“If you’re suggesting that I’m jealous over her, then you’re misleading yourself.” The flush in her cheeks doesn’t quite back up what she’s saying, but I find her jealousy insanely cute.

“Fine, you can come, but I’ll warn you, if she tries any shit I’m dealing with this my way.”



“S he has a bottle made up and plenty of diapers packed in the bag. If she cries for no reason, she likes to go over your shoulder and have her bottom patted like this...” Shaniya shows me what to do, before she places the baby in her car seat and hands her over to Jessie. “Are you sure Mel isn’t doing this to try to get her back?” she asks, chewing her bottom lip nervously.

“Trust me, Shan, by the sounds of things, Mel is looking to get away, and from something that’s bigger than us. The last thing she’s gonna want is to take baggage with her.” Jessie straps the baby in the back of his truck while I hug his sister and promise we’ll have her home soon.

When Jessie called Mel this morning, he arranged to meet her at a diner over in Avondale. It’s a good hour’s drive from the club, but I like the idea of us meeting her somewhere public. Not only does it lower the chances of her trying anything stupid, but it also lowers the risk of Jessie losing his shit with her.

I couldn’t rest last night after she called, so I put my energy to good use and searched for all the legal papers we would need online. The brown file with all the paperwork is resting on the dash, and Jessie waits for me to strap myself in,

then gives me a reassuring nod before he pulls away from Troj and Shaniya's cabin.

"Do you think Storm will come round to the idea of her?" I look back between the seats at the helpless, little girl who's turned this club upside down over the past week.

"I hope he does. He'll regret it if he don't," Jessie tells me. "But people like Storm can't be pushed. They gotta figure these things out for themselves."

"So you're basically telling me not to interfere?" I look across at him and smirk.

"You? Never," he frowns at me, and it makes me laugh.

"I have faith he will do the right thing, Jessie. That's why we're doing this." I reach across and take his hand. I know this goes against his morals, and maybe Mel doesn't deserve a chance to see the baby that she so easily abandoned. But she's about to give her up for good, and she should say goodbye properly.

"You ever gonna stop being right?" The way Jessie smiles at me still makes my stomach flip the same way it did when we first met, and I quickly lean over the seat and kiss his cheek.

"What was that for?" he laughs.

"It's alright for a woman to kiss her husband, ain't it?" I tease.

"Say that again. I like how it sounds."

Reaching over again, I let my lips brush against his ear as I repeat the words in a slightly more seductive tone.

"It's alright for a woman to kiss her husband." I press my lips into his jaw as I shift back over to my seat.

“You’re damn lucky there’s a baby in the back, and I gotta keep a hand on the wheel,” he warns.

We arrive at the diner right on time, and when Jessie pulls up in the parking lot and his eyes scope the place out, I sense there’s something off.

“What’s up?”

“It’s eleven am. I’d expect the place to be busier.” Resting his arms on the steering wheel, he leans forward and studies the place through the windshield.

“Maybe the food here isn’t too great,” I shrug. The place doesn’t look very appealing. The windows are dirty, and if it wasn’t for the fact the neon ‘open’ sign is blinking through them, I’d think the place was closed.

“I’m going in first. Lock the doors.” Jessie takes his gun out of his holster and pulls back the slide.

“Jessie...”

“Shift over here and lock the doors. If shit goes sideways, drive away and call Prez.” He talks over me, and the serious look he shoots me with, tells me not to argue.

He reaches across to kiss me, then grabs the envelope off the dash as he pulls away.

When he gets out of the truck, he waits until I’ve shimmied into the driver’s seat and pushed down the lock, before he turns around, casually tucks his gun into the back of his jeans and heads toward the entrance to the diner.

I sit and wait, tapping my feet in the footwell and counting the minutes in my head. It's frustrating that the blinds are pulled down too low for me to see what's going on inside, and the more seconds that pass, the more I start to get anxious.

The baby starts to fuss, and I reach back between the seats to place my hand on her tummy and let her know I'm here.

"Don't cry, sweetie. We'll be leaving soon, I promise." I turn back around to look at the diner, and fear catches in my throat, forbidding me to scream, when I see the three mean-looking men who are walking toward me.

I fumble with the keys in the ignition to start the engine as they hold out their guns and fire at the wheels. The noise of ricocheting bullets sets the baby off screaming, and panic takes over as I continue to try to turn the keys in the ignition. There's no way Jessie would let these men hurt me, and the closer they get, the more I start to worry about what could have happened to him.

I manage to start the engine, but when a bullet hits the windshield and shatters the glass, I have to duck my head and cover my ears.

The sound of the baby crying behind me breaks my heart because there's nothing I can do to protect her, and there's nothing I can say to comfort her. All I can do is wait and hope that Jessie is coming. The glass from the window beside me smashes, and when a huge arm reaches in and grips my throat, the realization that something terrible must have happened to Jessie sinks in.



I walk into the diner with my wits about me, and when I see Mel sitting in one of the booths with a shit-eating grin on her face, it makes me want to pull out my gun and put a bullet right between her eyes.

“Jessie,” she licks her lips hungrily as I step up toward her, clutching the papers in my hand and hoping we can get this done fast.

“Did you bring her?” she asks, trying to convince me that she gives a fuck.

“Yeah. I brought her, and as soon as you’ve signed these papers, I’ll let you see her,”

Mel laughs at me. It’s a real smug laugh that kinda gets my back up.

“I really like how you think you’re in control here,” the smarmy, little bitch leans forward and crosses her hands.

“Jessie Donavon, the master of inflicting pain, huh? Cool, calm, collected.” I can hear the footsteps that come from behind me, and I don’t have to look around to know I’m outnumbered. I can count at least three different sets of feet.

But as Mel correctly pointed out, I'm cool, I'm calm, and I'm fucking collected because in a situation like this panicking don't help no one.

I can take out three men. It's what those three men are armed with, that's gonna be the problem.

I slowly turn around to see what I'm faced with and when my eyes meet with the man staring back at me, I almost stumble back in shock.

"Surprised, VP?" he smiles, and the two men standing on either side of him point the AK's they're holding at me.

"You're a dead man." There are no other words I got, and I have no choice but to stand still. Maddy and the baby are out in the parking lot, and I'm no use to them if I'm loaded with bullets.

More footsteps come from behind me, and when I twist my head and look over my shoulder at the four men who step out from the restroom, I know I'm completely fucked.

I reach behind me to grab my gun, but before I can grasp it in my hand the full force of a fist slams at my face. It knocks me off balance, and when I go to fight back, all the fuckers jump me at the same time. As blow after blow lands on my body, Maddy's face appears on the back of my eyelids, and the pain I feel doesn't come from the men attacking me. It's created by guilt. When that pain stops hurting, and the black takes over so I can't see her face anymore, I know I've failed her.

The throbbing in my head tells me I'm alive, the aching in my arms tells me I'm detained, and the tap I feel against my jaw makes me snap my eyes open.

I'm wondering if I'm dreaming when I see him in front of me. We've been hunting him down for so long that he almost seems like a mythological creature. I hate that the cunt, staring back at me, used to be a man I admired. My father trusted him, my club trusted him, and he betrayed us all.

"You don't look too happy to see me, Jess," Chop smirks, and I want to slice it right off his face. I look up and see my hands, tied with rope around the thick pipe that runs across the ceiling.

"See, I always had you marked as the clever one. Prez thinks so too, it seems," his hand taps over the VP badge on my cut, that used to belong to him.

I figure I must be in a bad way because my face stings, and I taste blood on my lips when I go to speak.

"You fuc..."

"Sorry, you're gonna have to speak up. We can't hear you." When he leans in closer, I find enough strength to jerk my body at him, but he doesn't flinch.

"See, that's something I always admired about you. You've always had that spark. But tell me, Jess, what happens to the dog when you take the fight out of it?" He creases his forehead at me like he's waiting on an answer, and when he takes a few steps back, enabling me to see what's behind him, my heart actually stops fucking beating. "You weren't supposed to bring her with you, Jessie," he shakes his head like he's disappointed in me, as he moves over to the chair where he's got Maddy restrained. She's naked, with her arms bound behind her back,

and the way her ankles are tied to the front legs, spreads her thighs apart. Her mouth is gagged with a dirty rag, and her pretty, blue eyes are wild with fear.

I immediately start to fight against the ropes holding me so I can get to her. It doesn't matter that they rip at my flesh. I have to get her out of here.

“Let her go, she ain't got nothing to do with this!” I try not to panic, but the anger and the fear that's building up inside me comes out in my voice, and I just know the sick prick in front of me will get off on it.

“She belongs to you. She has *everything* to do with it.” Chop's filthy hand brushes her hair away from her shoulder to expose her neck, and the way his fingers touch her makes my skin crawl. I don't care if I have to shred my wrists open. I need to get to her.

“You see that panic in his eyes,” he lowers his head and whispers in her ear. “It's because he knows what's coming.” Chop sniggers at me, and knowing what this man is capable of has my guts wringing.

“Mads, keep looking at me, okay? Just focus on me.” I keep my eyes locked on hers. She's losing her shit, all the panic's taking over. She saw the video. She knows what Chop did to Carly, and seeing my girl fear that he will do it to her while I'm fucking helpless, is worse than any pain I've ever had to endure.

I suddenly wish I hadn't told her to keep looking at me because when Chop takes out a knife and touches it to her clavicle, I can't hide the fear from my face.

“You think this man in front of you loves you, but you're *so* wrong,” he whispers into her ear, and all I can do is watch

as her body shudders and her lashes blink back tears.

“Everyone this man has ever loved is dead. If he loved you, he’d have spared you from that curse, sweetheart.” His words cut into me deeper than the ropes that bind me.

“It takes a real man to walk away from something special,” his hand delicately brushes over her cheek and strokes through her tears. It pumps more rage into my blood, feeding me with adrenaline that I can’t fucking use.

Maddy’s looking at me like she’s expecting me to strike. Despite me being tied and all out of options, she still has that faith in me. She’s waiting for me to do something, and it’s breaking my heart that I can’t.

“If he really cared for you, he would have let you go,” Chop tells her, looking at me as he speaks.

“Why are you doing this?” I yell at him. *Fuck*. I have to close my eyes to take a break from looking at her because I know what kinda sick fuck I’m dealing with here, and I can’t take the fucking thought of it.

“Why?” Chop chuckles and rests his chin on the opposite shoulder to where he’s holding his knife. “You ever heard the phrase ‘kill or be killed’?” The point of that knife pierces her skin, and she gasps, her eyes widening as the blood starts to trickle. I watch Chop lean across the front of her body and roll his tongue through its trail.

“I’m gonna fucking kill you,” I promise, exhaling through my nose like a bull.

Now I’ve come around a little better, I realize my legs ain’t tied. I figure I can use them, but for that to happen I need him to be close.

“Let me tell you what was supposed to happen here today.” Chop straightens his body and rests his hand back on Maddy’s shoulder. The one still holding the knife is dangerously close to her neck, and I see her worried eyes focusing on it as her body trembles.

“You were supposed to come here alone. I was gonna have some fun, and then we were gonna dump your body in Pueblo to show that, despite what you’ve been trying to prove, it’s still Bastard territory.”

“Bastards are fucking dead, you cunt,” I have to preserve my energy. My body is already beaten. The longer I can keep him talking, the more I can recharge.

I don’t like the way he laughs at me. It’s smug and fucking confident.

“I got half their Texas Charter sitting upstairs, ready to disagree with you. See, the Bastards you *thought* you knew didn’t realize that everyone has a cog in the wheel. They might have let you wipe out a whole Charter without any blowback, but that was before they found the right leadership. We ain’t just gonna take back what the Souls took from us, Jessie. We’re gonna take it all, and you were gonna be the one to deliver that message.”

His finger twists around one of Maddy’s blonde locks of hair.

“Guess we got a new way to deliver it now.” He raises his eyebrows at me and grins.

“I swear to fucking god...” I yank the ropes and feel all that adrenaline inside me burn.

“I’ll give it to you Jess, she’s a pretty one.” His hand slides lower to squeeze one of her tits and I swear, if I could turn all

the fury inside me into strength, I'd rip this pipe from the ceiling and tear his face off with my teeth.

Maddy struggles against her restraints, muffling around her gag, and when he rips it out of her mouth so I can hear her terrified scream, I feel tears build behind my eyes and frustration course through my veins.

“That’s right darlin’, let him hear it.” He waves his hand like he’s conducting an orchestra and when she eventually quietens, I have to remind myself to fucking breathe.

“Mel tells me Jessie, here, was your first.” Chop watches my reaction as his hand slips lower, sliding down her stomach until his fingers press between her pussy lips. “Is he the only one who’s ever touched this pretty, little pussy?” I can’t think of a time when I’ve ever wanted to kill someone more than I do right now. And as I feel myself fall apart, my girl fights back. Turning her head, she bites his bicep hard, and when Chop reacts by backhanding her cheek so hard that she yelps like a puppy, I fight against the ropes harder.

“I’m gonna gut you open, you son of a fucking bitch!” I scream at him, the rage in my body becoming so powerful I swear I’ll fucking die from it.

“You ain’t gonna do shit,” Chop laughs as he comes at me, just not close enough for me to fucking get to him.

“You like making people suffer, Jessie. Let’s see how it feels to watch someone you care about get that treatment. Let’s show your girl, here, what it is you do,”

I’m scorching on the inside, and I don’t know what’s got me more, fear or fucking anger.

“I’ll tell you what’s gonna happen, VP. Upstairs...” his eyes flick up to the ceiling. “... I got five pissed off, sick,

twisted fucks, who are drawing straws over who gets to cum in your wife's cunt first.”

I spit at his face, feeling my raw skin weep into the rope as I lunge to get at him. Chop wipes my saliva from his cheek and laughs at me.

“Then when they're done, I'm gonna come back down here and make sure the last cock she remembers ripping her apart, is mine.”

Maddy's terrified sobs make all the tension inside my chest thud deeper, it beats so hard I'm sure it'll explode, and when Chop starts making his way toward the door, I have to stop myself from freaking out, and use the short time I got, to pull myself together.

Vex didn't just train us to interrogate, he trained us to *be* interrogated, but nothing I ever went through could have prepared me for this. It's the reason why men like me should never love.

I focus on what I can use to get her out of here. When you're in a situation like the one we're in now, you gotta look at everything as an opportunity.

“Jessie...” Maddy's weak, petrified voice calls out to me.

“Mads, I have to focus. I gotta get us outta this.” Looking around, I see nothing. I'm tied firm to the pipe, and the basement we're in is practically empty.

“Jess, I'm scared,” she weeps, and I make the mistake of looking at her.

Her eyes are swollen and red-rimmed, her skin is pale, and she looks broken. This is all before they've even started, and I vow to myself that I won't let it happen. I will not let anyone hurt her. No matter what it takes.

“Mads, when that door opens, I want you to close your eyes. Keep them shut, and blank everything out.” I see potential when I look further down the pipe, but what I’m gonna have to do won’t be pretty.

“Jessie, they took the baby,” she sounds so worried, and it’s typical of her to be caring about someone else at a time like this.

“Maddy, look at me. We gotta worry about this first, okay? What do you do when that door opens?” I check she was listening because Mads may have seen me kill for her before, but what I’m gonna have to do to get us outta this is not something I want her to remember.

“I close my eyes,” she responds, like she’s given up hope.

“Right.” I nod back at her reassuringly, before I get to work.

There’s some rusting on the pipe where it’s welded to the one by the door, and figure it’s my best option. I use all the strength I got to shuffle along the pipe to get to the joint. If I can make it to the door, it will give me the element of surprise for an attack when they come down, then all I gotta do is pray for a fucking miracle.

“Jess, I’ll be okay. If it happens, I want you to know I’ll be okay.” She’s trying so hard to be brave, but I see her fear, and I squeeze my eyes shut and let it feed my determination.

“That’s not gonna happen,” I shake my head. “I won’t let them touch you, I promise.” The thought of breaking that promise has me moving faster, and when I eventually make it to the other side of the room by the door, I brace my feet against the wall and use all my body strength to yank at the pipe.

I ignore the pain of the ropes cutting through my skin and focus on what will happen if I can't rip this fucking pipe from the wall.

"Jessie! Shhhh." Mads hushes my groaning when she hears something, and the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs makes me pause.

"Close those eyes darlin'," I nod my head to assure her it's gonna be okay one last time, then once she does as she's told, I take a breath and prepare myself for what has to come next.

Maddy's witnessed me do brutal things in the past. I sliced a man's throat open in front of her, back at Verretti's mansion, but it's easy to slit a man's throat or put a bullet in his skull.

What I'm about to do will take determination and strength. I'm at a disadvantage, and I got no doubt they'll fight hard. I'll just fight harder.

I'm about to prove that there are no lengths I wouldn't go to, to protect her. And if for some reason I don't get us out of this, I don't want my girl's last memory of me to be what I'm about to do to the next man who walks through this door.

I take one last look at my wife, naked and tied to a chair, with blood dripping between her tits and her eyes closed like she's praying for a miracle. And when the door handle pushes down, I remind myself that failure ain't a fucking option.

The door opens and as soon as the cunt steps through it, I use the pipe as leverage and move fast to wrap my legs around the trunk of his body. Physically, I've never been weaker, but mentally I have the strength of an army, so when he struggles against me, thrusting his body and trying to reach for the gun in his holster, I manage to keep hold of him. I use my legs to drag him tight to my body and hope that Maddy's still got her

eyes shut as I sink my teeth deep into his throat. I tear at his flesh like an animal, ignoring his gags and the taste of his blood as it fills my mouth.

I've never killed like this before, but Vex has. He told me about it once when I was a boy, and it made me sick to my stomach. I promised myself that no matter how savage I became, I'd never reach that level of barbarity. But a broken promise to myself is far better than a broken one to her. So I continue to rip chunks out of the guy, crushing his throat between my teeth until his pulse stops beating against them, and then I tear that outta him, too. I wait for his body to turn heavy before I loosen my legs and release him, then spitting a mouthful of his blood at his face I get straight back to work, loosening the pipe.

"Jess," Maddy still has her eyes closed, and she looks so helpless I could fucking cry.

"You can open 'em now," I tell her softly, and when she looks to the floor at the body of the man who came down here to rape her and then sees my face covered in his blood, she turns even paler.

I don't have time to waste. I gotta rip this damn pipe from the wall because there are plenty more men to kill, and I don't like the idea of having to taste them, too.

I feel it starting to give after a few more hard yanks, and the thought of what comes next gives me the perseverance to keep at it. The sound of gas wheezing through the gap in the pipe tells me I'm close, and I use all that's left of my strength to rip it free from the one it's connected to. My arms drop heavily in front of me, and I quickly tear at the knots in the rope with my teeth to loosen them. I don't know how long I've got before the next man comes, so I go to the dead man's body,

take the knife from his belt and shove its handle in my mouth. I use the blade to saw through the ropes, and when I'm finally free, I pick up the gun that fell out of his hand during our struggle, tuck it in my jeans, then race over to free Maddy.

As soon as I cut her arms free, she wraps them around my neck, clinging to me so tight I feel her heart thud against mine. I wish I had time to comfort her and tell her everything's gonna be okay, but I have a room full of men to kill.

"Mads," I stroke my hand through her hair, as I pull her away and make sure she's focused.

"I need to leave you down here, and you have to barricade that door,"

"No," she shakes her head defiantly. "I'm not staying down here alone. I'm coming with you,"

"Mads, there's at least five of 'em, all armed. I can't risk you getting hurt."

"You won't let them," she assures me. And when I look down at her and realize she's still naked, I quickly take off my cut, pull my T-shirt off over my head and shove it over hers.

"Please, Jessie, I'll stay close. I'll do whatever you tell me. Just please, don't leave me on my own again." I have to stop myself from kissing her trembling lips. I don't want her to taste the blood of the man I just killed.

"Okay." I nod her a promise, before pulling my cut back on and placing the gun in Maddy's hands.

"Don't be afraid to use this and stay behind me."

I clutch the handle of the knife and use it to free her legs, and then pulling her up, I lead us to the door.

“Do I have to close my eyes for this, too?” she whispers, when I reach the door at the top of the long, narrow staircase.

“No darlin’, you just remember what each and every man in there wanted to do to you.” I press my blood-stained lips against her forehead before I take a breath and kick the door open.



“E veryone in the members’ bar, now!” I call out to the brothers who are gathered in the barroom. There’s a few of ‘em missing, but we ain’t got time to take this to church.

Brax, Troj, and Squealer join me, followed closely by Storm and Tawk, who are working on fixing the pool table. My heart rate is so erratic I can’t think straight, and what’s worse is that all this is my own dumb fault. I should have seen this coming.

“What’s up, Prez?” Nyx strolls through the door without a care in the world, but his face soon drops when he sees how serious I am.

“I just got this from an unknown number.” I place my phone on the table for everyone to see the picture I got of Jessie, beaten, hanging out cold from a fucking pipe.

The shocked look on everyone’s faces reflects my thoughts, and I know we all got the same questions. How, and fucking who?

“Mel,” Troj speaks up, and Storm narrows his eyes like he’s as confused as I am.

“What the fuck has she got to do with this?” he asks.

“She called up Jess last night and said she wanted to sign over parental control to you. So that’s where him and Maddy went this morning. They took the kid because she wanted to see her one last time.”

“Shit!” I slam my fist at the table and turn my back on all the faces that are looking at me for a fucking answer.

“So Maddy’s with him?” Nyx checks,

“Yeah, the kid, too.” Troj’s eyes flick to Storm, who’s got a real unpredictable look on his face.

“We gotta get to them,” Troj looks ready to go to war, and when Skid and Thorne rush through the door, I hear Tawk quickly bring them up to speed on what’s going on.

“Do you know where they were meeting her?”

I scrub my hand over my face, trying to think straight and come up with a plan. Mel couldn’t have done this alone. She must have people working with her, and the last time the boys caught up with her, she was side-hustling for Chop. I’m not liking where this is fucking going.

“It’s a diner just outside of Fort Carson. Mads wanted to make sure it all happened in a public place. She wanted witnesses.”

“Squeal, where’s your old lady? We need her to find out where this place is and try tracking phones or some shit. That’s what Maddy would do, right?” I don’t know whose approval I’m looking for. All I know is that I can’t let anything happen to them.

“She works with Maddy. She must know how to work some of the shit she uses.”

“I’ll go get her, boss,” for once in his life Squeal looks serious before he races off to find her.

Some of us need to start heading in that direction. We can’t go in, big on numbers. We need the element of surprise.

“I’m coming,” Skid steps forward, and he looks ready to tear down walls. “Mel has connections to Chop. You know he’s gonna be somewhere behind this.” I nod my head at Skid. Ain’t no way I can refuse him.

“I’m coming, too, to protect you and get my best friend back.” Troj is next, and I’m just thinking that we can’t risk taking any more when Storm steps in front of me.

“Me, too.” The look he’s giving me dares me to refuse him, but this is my club, and I do what the hell I please.

“We got enough. I can’t risk them knowing we’re coming,”

“I get that, Prez, but in case you were forgetting, she’s mine.” He says the last part weakly, and we ain’t got no space on this little field trip for fucking weak.

“You’re staying behind.”

I shove past him, getting ready to move out the door and onto my bike.

“No, I fucking ain’t!” Storm yells after me, and when I slowly turn around and stare back at him, he proves he ain’t backing down when he holds my glare.

“What you just say, boy?”

“I said I ain’t staying here, and I ain’t no fucking *boy*. I’m her father.” Storm seems to grow in strength as he steps up to me, and I can only imagine the shock on all my brothers’ faces when he stands nose to nose with me.

“She’s *my* daughter, and it’s up to me to get her back,” he tells me firmly.

I hold his determined eyes with mine and nod my head.

“‘Bout time you found your balls, son. Now, let’s ride out and get you that little girl back.” I turn around and head out to the yard and just as I’m about to get on my bike, something on the other side of the yard catches my eye.

“What’s going down, Prez?” Rogue clearly hasn’t got a clue what’s happening, but I figure she can sense there’s something up. She’s got that thrill in her eye, and I swear that girl could sniff out trouble from a mile away.

“You working on that car?” I flick my eyes onto the cop car Roswell’s new deputy brought in earlier this morning.

“About to start. Why?”

“Because I need to borrow it.”



I see no sign of Chop or Mel when the door flies open, and Jessie immediately throws himself into action. But I do see the baby, and so that's where I head. Bullets are flying, and knowing that these men who want to hurt me and Jessie wouldn't care if she got hurt too, makes me take hold of the car seat that's resting on the diner counter and shelter us both behind it.

I breathe and pray as I hear the sound of men dying, and the hand I'm holding the gun with shakes uncontrollably. I need to help Jessie. He's outnumbered. But I feel traumatized. Having Chop's hands on me reminded me of everything he did to Carly, and realizing how close I just came to the same thing happening to me roots me to the spot. The baby's crying, so I take her out of her seat and hold her close to my chest.

And when I feel something cool touch my temple, I swallow the lump of lead that forms in my throat and allow the hand that wraps around my arm, to raise me onto my feet.

"Jessie!" That familiar voice calls out the name of the man I love, and when I open my eyes, I see him. Jessie, despite being battered and bruised himself, is covered in the blood of the fallen men around him, and I watch him pull his knife from the eye socket of the guy bent back on the table in front of

him, as he stares at Chop. That same look of dread he had down in the basement replaces all the anger in his eyes, and the fact he looks so panicked does nothing to calm me down. Chop thrusts his hips into my back to move me forward, stepping me out from behind the counter and lining us up in front of him.

“Let her go.” He instantly drops the knife from his hand, letting it clatter to the floor, and I crush the little girl I’m holding, tight to my chest and pray for us all.

“See, proof. A man is capable of anything when he has a reason. You must have yourself one helluva magic pussy, Mrs. Donavon.” When his tongue slides along my jaw, my whole body shivers from it.

“And what’s your reasoning, Chop? Why did you turn on all your brothers? Even your own flesh and blood. Why?” I don’t know why Jessie is fueling the fire. Maybe it’s to buy time, or maybe he’s just that curious. Chop’s betrayal shook the whole club, and it must be even harder for Jessie to accept, now that he knows he killed his father, too.

“How about we ask *you* some questions, Jessie?” Chop turns the tables on him, and when Mel steps around the bar to stand beside him, I realize there are no other men alive. Jessie has somehow killed them all.

I look at the woman and cling to her baby, tighter. I won’t let her take her back. What kind of mother uses her baby as a decoy and then leaves her in the firing line?

“What are you talking about?” Jessie stares back at Chop, blankly.

“Well, everyone has secrets, don’t they?” Chop’s breath touching the back of my neck makes me feel sick.

“Why don’t you tell your pretty, little bitch here, what you’ve been hiding from her for all this time.” I see Jessie’s confused expression morph into anger, and the way he clenches his fists suggests whatever it is, he doesn’t want me to hear.

“Go on, tell her,” Mel smirks, as she steps a little closer to me, looking me up and down like I’m dirt on her shoe.

“Tell me what?” I manage to get the words out. Suddenly the gun to my head doesn’t matter. I need to know what Jessie’s been keeping from me.

“Mads,” he shakes his head at me, looking crushed. “I didn’t tell you because I knew it would hurt and... I didn’t want you to...”

“Clunk was your daddy, sweetheart.” Chop whispers the words into my ear, and the chill of them makes my legs wobble.

“Steady there,” he uses the hand he’s holding me with, to stop me from falling.

“Clunk, as in...”

“Pedophile, Bastard Prez.” Chop takes pleasure in finishing my sentence, and I see the way Jessie’s head drops in defeat.

“You knew?” I feel my eyes prickle with tears.

“Mad’s, I was trying to protect you.” When he looks back up at me, I can see his guilt, but it doesn’t stop the stinging in my chest.

“Anyway, none of that matters now, Jessie, because I gotta message for Jimmer, and you need to decide who’s gonna deliver it.”

“Let her go,” Jessie pleads.

“The Bastards are coming, and they are led by me now. We’re taking back what’s ours, and we’re gonna take what’s yours, too.”

“Chop...” Mel starts tugging at his arm, and when he goes to shoo her away, he must notice the cop car that just pulled up outside because he freezes.

“Fuck!” I feel his chest sag behind me.

“I guess I’ll just have to decide for you,” I hear a loud click in my head, and everything happens so fast. Jessie darts forward at me, and when the gun goes off, I don’t feel any pain, just the heavy crush of Jessie’s body as he rips me from Chop’s arm and slams me and the baby onto the ground to shelter us. My ears are ringing so loud I can barely hear anything except the distant sound of the baby screaming, which tells me she’s alive. I push on Jessie’s shoulder to stop him from crushing her, and when he doesn’t move, I start to panic.

“Jessie!” I call out his name as the door crashes open and Prez races through it. His eyes are swollen with fear as he looks down at us. When Troj rips at Jessie to pull him off me, and I realize that me and the baby are sticky with blood, terror builds so high in my throat that I can’t even scream it out.

My sound comes back, and I hear Troj. “*Holy shit*. Call an ambulance!” he screams at Prez, who drops to his knees beside Jessie and stares at him blankly.

“Is she okay?” I look up, and the concern on Storm’s face causes me to slowly loosen my grip and release his little girl into his arms.

His eyes check her over, and the sigh of relief he makes when he realizes she's not hurt, makes me smile at him sadly.

"You're okay," he clutches her tighter. "You're okay, I got you." He lets out another long, deep breath before he steps out of my way, and I focus on the chaos that's happening around Jessie.

"Gun-shot wound. Come quick." I can hear Prez shouting to the operator, and somehow I manage to crawl across the floor to where Troj is sitting behind Jessie, propping him up with his chest and trying to stop his bleeding at the same time. Prez continues to shout down the phone, losing his temper with whoever he's talking to.

"Jess..." his name wobbles out from my lips when I touch the leather of his cut, and it's slick with blood. I stare at my fingers in shock. Troj lifts the bloody T-shirt he's pressing into his chest a little, and the bullet hole, I see just above his badge, oozes thick with more blood.

"Shit, Prez, tell 'em to fucking hurry." Troj sounds so scared, and when I look up at Jessie and see his eyes are open, it gives me a little hope.

"You okay?" he asks weakly. The life is draining out of him, and as I take his hand in mine and pull it to my mouth to kiss his knuckles, I nod my head to let him know I'm okay.

There's so much blood around his mouth that I can't tell if it's his or if it belonged to the man he killed in the basement.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you." He struggles to get the words out, and when more blood comes out with them, I feel all that hope vanish.

"Don't worry about that now, Jess." I blink through my tears and squeeze his hand tighter.

“You know I love you, right?” He manages to pull his lips up into that boyish grin that I’m so hopelessly in love with.

“Jessie Donavon, don’t you fucking dare say goodbye to me!” I make the tone of my voice stern. “We’ve been through too much, and we’ve got so much more to get through. I will not have you leave me.”

“We don’t always get the choice, darlin’.” When his eyes start to close, I clasp his jaw in my hand and force him to focus on me.

“Jessie, you don’t *fucking* leave me. That’s not how this works. Do you hear me?”

“Yeah darlin’, I hear you,” he laughs weakly,

“Then promise me. Do it now, promise me you won’t leave me.”

“I promise,” he smiles sadly, and as the sirens sound out in the distance and the blood continues to pour, I hold on to the reassurance that Jessie has always been a man of his word.



I sit in the corner of the tiny room, chewing on my thumb as I watch the pediatrician check her over. She's a kind, middle-aged woman with a gentle manner, and she seems to have bought the story Alex told me to tell her, about us being involved in a hold-up at the local diner.

“She's perfectly fine.” She lifts her up off the examination table and smiles at me before handing her back over. She's wearing a tiny, patient robe with teddies on that one of the nurses put her in, after cleaning all of Jessie's blood off her, and suddenly I realize it's up to me to change her and get her home. There's no sign of my sister or Shaniya. It's just me and her.

“I'll get her discharge paperwork up together, and then you can take her home.”

The doctor disappears out the door, leaving us alone, and I pull up a stool to take a seat and then sit her ass on the table in front of me.

I see it in her eyes, now. They remind me of Riley's when she was younger. It doesn't matter how hard I try to fight it, this little girl is mine. I was happy to bypass all that and put the responsibility of her on to someone else, until I found out she was in danger. In that moment, everything Brax told me

the other day became clear. When it comes to protecting her, I am the only person I can assure would stop at nothing.

The relief I felt when I knew she was okay was unexplainable. It was instinctive and overpowering, which is strange because I don't even know her yet.

Most have time to get used to the idea of being a parent. They usually have a connection with the person they created a life with. The only connection I have to Mel is the fact I want to throttle her. I don't know what her incentive was for using our child as a pawn. There was no reason for her to ask Jessie to take her with him. But it makes me realize that Maddy was right about getting those papers signed. I have to make sure she can never do anything like this again.

My daughter's big, wide eyes stare back at me, and I wonder what she expects. Love? Affection? All the things that I've forgotten how to give. These days I only know darkness, and how the fuck is that a base to raise a child on?

"I don't know what I'm doing," I admit to her, even though she won't understand me.

"You drew unlucky when you got me, kid,"

She makes a gurgling sound and smiles, and I can't help the way it lifts my lips.

"But I figure having one psycho parent is enough, so I'm gonna play my part," I make her a promise.

"I'm gonna fuck up along the way, and I'm gonna need a lot of help. I'm stubborn and proud, so that help ain't gonna be easy for me to ask for. But, if you stick with me and learn to forgive some shit, I can promise I won't let you down."

When I stand us both up, and her head tucks itself into the crook of my neck, I feel something tug inside my chest. It's

scary because it feels so unfamiliar and a lot like a weakness, but it also tells me that we're gonna be okay.

The door bursts open, and the nurse who cleaned her up earlier comes through with the forms.

"Here we go, I just need you to sign there, and you can take..." she looks at the form for a name.

"Sorry, we must have rushed you through so fast. All I've got here is baby Hayes," she giggles, taking my little girl's hand and shaking it.

"Faith." My mother's name is the first thing that comes to mind, and when I look down at my little girl, I realize it's perfect. Because she's sure gonna have to have a lot of it, in me.

"That's a pretty name." The nurse smiles as I squiggle my name on the bottom line of all the papers, and when I take my daughter and walk out the door, I'm surprised that I don't feel that crushing weight of burden from before, just relief that she's okay.

I don't leave the hospital straight away, instead I go to where I know the rest of the club will be gathered, to see if there's anything I can do. I don't blame Jessie and Maddy for taking Faith with them today. They were doing what they thought was right by her, which is more than can be said for me. And the fact Jessie took a bullet to protect her, now has me forever in his debt.

When I step into the family room up in the ICU, it's crammed full. Most of the brothers are here, some of the old ladies too, and everyone has the same worried look on their faces.

“Hey, sweetie,” Shaniya moves from under Troj’s arm to take Faith from my arms and kiss her cheek. “What did they say?” she looks up at me worried. I know if she had her way, she would have come with me, but she was needed here to support Troj. Things weren’t looking good for Jessie when the ambulance took him away.

“She’s fine, clean bill of health. How about Jessie?”

I look at Maddy, who’s wrapped in a blanket, and still only wearing the bloody T-shirt we found her in, beneath it. She’s white as a sheet, with blood splattered on her face, and clumped in her hair. Prez is comforting her, and I’ve never seen our leader look so fucking scared.

“He’s still in surgery,” Shan smiles me a helpless smile, and the blank look on Maddy’s face as she stares at the white tiled floor, tells me she’s lost hope.

Skid looks furious as he paces the room. I’ve never seen a man his size shift so fast when we first arrived at that diner. He chased his brother out the back door, and I know that failing to catch him will be eating him up inside.

“We gotta keep searching. He’s close by, and now he’s building a brand new Bastard *fucking* army.” Skid punches his fist at the wall, and no one tries to stop him from losing his shit.

“How did I not see this coming?” Prez shakes his head, like he’s at fault for all this.

“Chop lost six men today. He’s gonna crawl back into his hole, but at least we know where to find him, now.” Troj moves to stand in front of Prez. “We take down every fucking Bastard Charter there is. This is a club fucking war now.”

“Maybe you should get that little girl home,” Shaniya whispers.

I don't want to admit to her in a room full of my brothers that, despite coming to terms with this, I'm still fucking petrified. Jessie's just taken a bullet, for fuck's sake, and here I am, scared of being responsible for a baby.

“You're gonna be fine. When you guys left, me and Riley went to your cabin and had a cleanup. I made her up some bottles and set the bassinet up in your room. Riley's there waiting for you both to come home.”

I nod at her, gratefully. Looking at Shaniya always used to cause a little pain. I never wanted to be bound to her, but now I can't help but feel grateful for it.

“You can take the cop car back to Rogue. We fixed her seat in the back,” Troj throws the keys at me as Shaniya hands Faith back over, and kisses her goodbye.

“You need me. Just call.”

“Shan,” I take her hand in mine before she can pull away. “I'm gonna need to take you up on that offer you made at my cabin,” I glance my eyes around the room and swallow my pride. I know Riley is gonna do her best to be there for us, but I need all the help I can with this. “We're gonna need some help.”

“Anytime.” The warm smile she makes back at me proves that she means it.

I nod back at her, and before I head out the door, I move over to Maddy.

“Thank you for protecting her.” I wonder if she even hears me when she doesn't raise her head.

“This was all my fault,” her brows knit together. “I insisted Jessie take me there. If Jessie dies, it’s on me.” The realization dawns on her, and Troj immediately crouches in front of her and shakes his head.

“No, this ain’t on you. This is on Mel, Chop, and those Bastards from Texas,”

“I made him take me to get those papers signed. I wouldn’t quit. He said it was a bad idea.”

I watch Prez tighten his arm around her shoulder.

“That’s why Jessie loves you so much, Mads. You were doing the right thing, and the reason that didn’t work out was because nobody saw this coming. If this is on anyone, it’s on me for not being vigilant and sitting back on my haunches.” His head reaches back to the wall, and his huge chest sags with guilt.



When I open my eyes, all I see is white. I'm sure this ain't Hell, but the fact my body aches so badly, makes me question it.

"Jessie?" I hear Maddy's voice, and when I turn my head to my left, she's sitting there beside me, her pretty, wide eyes shocked like she didn't have any fucking belief in me.

She should know better. I made her a promise.

"Oh, my god. You're okay." She launches herself at me, and I have to try to hide the slice of pain it causes because I don't want her to stop.

"You okay?" I manage to lift my hand up to stroke her hair out of her face, it's sticky and covered with blood, and when I see the bruise Chop put on her left cheek, it turns all pain in my body to anger.

"I'm fine, Jessie. Fine." When she breaks into tears, I realize she's anything but fucking fine. I saw her face down in that basement. The way he touched her and the things he threatened to do, there's no way that ain't gonna haunt her.

"I thought I'd lost you." Her tears slip through my fingers as her eyes brim with more of them.

“I made you a promise, didn’t I?” I grin at her, and when she manages a tiny smile back, it takes the edge off the rage that’s slowly starting to repossess me.

“Listen, about what Chop...”

“We’re not talking about that now. We’ll talk about it when you’re healed and back at home. Jessie, nothing else matters. We’re here together. We’re okay. Just rest up.” That encouraging smile of hers only reminds me of how close it all came to not being okay.

I nod back at her and rest my head back on the pillow.

“I should go tell everyone you’re awake. Prez is desperate to see you, but they’d only let one of us in at a time.”

“Okay, baby. You send him on through.” I smile at her reassuringly and wait for her to leave before I take a look around me. I got tubes coming out of my hand, hooked up to an IV. My left shoulder feels like it’s been shattered, and I’m aching like I just crawled out of the grave, but none of that’s gonna stop me.

“Fuck Jess, you had us scared,” Prez crashes through the door. The old man looks pale and like he hasn’t slept in weeks, and it makes me wonder how long I was out for.

“Where’s Chop?” I ask, my muscles tensing as a thirst for vengeance claws at my insides.

“Skid went after him, but he was on foot, and Chop had a car out back. He got away.” He looks every bit as fucking angry telling me that as I am to hear it. And when I sit up and start tugging at the shit in my hand, he rushes over to me and uses my uninjured shoulder to push me back onto the bed.

“What the fuck are you playing at?” He stares me a warning.

“Oh, I ain’t fucking playing Prez. I’m gonna kill him.” I go to get up again, despite it hurting to strain against him, but he holds me firm.

“You damn near just fucking *died*. Had that bullet been half an inch lower, you’d be down on the bottom floor with the rest of the fucking stiffs. Lie back. That’s a fucking order.”

“I feel fine,” I assure him, ignoring the woozy feeling in my head.

“That’s ‘cause you’re pumped full of morphine right now. You lost a shit ton of blood, Jess, and I was convinced we’d lost you.” I see tears in the old man’s eyes, and it makes the taste of blood that’s still clogging my throat taste even more bitter.

“He did things to her. Did she tell you that?”

I can tell by the confusion on Prez’s face that she didn’t.

“You didn’t wonder why she had my T-shirt on when you got there? It’s because that fucker cut her clothes off her and tied her to a chair. He touched her in all the places she’s only ever let me. He hit her, and there was a time that she didn’t think I was gonna be able to save her. I ain’t gonna rest until he pays for that.”

“Shit,” Prez turns his back on me and walks over to look out the window, gripping the sill in his hands and lowering his head. “Son of a fucking bitch.” he utters under his breath.

“She saw what he did to Carly, and she thought he was gonna do it to her,” I explain, feeling bile rise to my throat and that heavy ache in my chest grows heavier.

“He told her about Clunk. She knows.” Prez spins his head to look at me. That’s a promise me, him, and Brax vowed to take to the grave.

“We know now he’s got connections with the Texas Charter. They obviously cared more about their sister club than we thought, and I guarantee they will want retaliation for that killing spree you went on before you got hit. Chop is gonna hide behind ‘em, waiting for the fight to come to him. I hate to say it, but he’s got the upper hand.”

“Mel helped him get me there. It was just supposed to be me. I don’t know why she wanted the kid there too—it makes no sense. All I know is that I was supposed to be the message to ya... He was gonna kill me to let you know they were taking Pueblo back.”

“They ain’t taking shit,” Prez speaks through his teeth.

“I want him dead. I want them all dead.” I tell him blankly.

“Get your rest, heal up, and that’s exactly what we’re gonna do.” The door knocks, and Maddy and Shaniya come through, with Troj following behind them. My sister immediately rushes to me, and I take another hit of pain for a good cause.

“You good, brother?” Troj tips his chin at me. I can see he’s holding his emotions back by the tension on his face.

“I’m here, ain’t I?” I smirk.

“Yeah, you’re fucking here.” He looks up at me like he’s mad at me.

“Then I’m good.” I smile at him, and he releases all that tension into a grin of his own.

“You had me fucking scared,” he admits, reaching across the bed so he can hug me himself.

“The doc’s coming to see you, so we should get out of your way, I just had to make sure you were okay,” Shaniya

squeezes my hand.

“Go home and rest. You all look like death.” My attempt to lighten the mood falls on its ass and earns me three unimpressed stares.

“Go on, get out of here. I wanna be with my girl.”

One by one they clear the room, leaving Maddy beside me, and she waits until they’ve closed the door before she climbs onto the bed and lies beside me. I didn’t notice it when she first walked in, but she’s changed into my club hoodie and a pair of my sweatpants. She looks like she’s mine, she smells like she’s mine, and she was crazy to think I’d ever have left her.

I’d fight beyond death to stay by this girl’s side.

“I’m sorry, Jessie,” her fingers slide up and down the gown I’m wearing.

“Sorry? Whatcha sorry for?” I pull my head back so I can look at her better.

“For being persistent and interfering. For dragging us into all of this. It was my fault. I need to learn when to let go.” She looks so sad it breaks my heart.

“Hey...” I fight against the pain and lift my arm so I can push up her chin and force her to look at me. “Yeah, you’re persistent and interfering, but it’s everything I fell in love with you, for. You always got everyone else’s best intentions in mind, and yeah, it can be hard to keep up with, but I never, ever want you to change a single thing about yourself.”

“You don’t mean that.” Her glassy eyes sink into my soul and ruin me, the same way they did that first day I saw her sitting on the steps outside her college.

“I mean every, damn word.” I kiss her forehead.

“Jessie,” she pulls away from me, and I watch her tongue wet her lips before she continues.

“When you get out of this hospital bed, and your wounds heal...” her pretty eyes turn sinister. “... I want to watch you gut that man from his asshole to his throat.” I can tell from the look on her face that she’s deadly, fucking serious. My girl’s world has been shaken by what happened. It’s gonna take a lot to heal her from it, but I’ll get her there. I ain’t gonna rest until he’s dead. That’s how I know for sure that Chop is gonna meet his maker, real fucking soon.

Making him pay just became my priority. I will hunt him down like a fucking dog, and when I get to him, all the others can fight over the scraps.

“You got it, darlin’,” I smile at her before I kiss her again, and suddenly all that rage inside me seems a little more tolerable.



Soon as we know Jessie's gonna be okay, we all ride back to the clubhouse. Troj decides to hang back with Maddy and stand guard, but that comes as no surprise. What happened today knocked him on his ass. He thought he'd lost him. We all did. Being so close to my brother and not getting a result out of it, infuriates me to the point of fucking destruction.

I don't go to the clubhouse like the others. I head straight to my cabin, so I can wallow in misery and blacken myself with agony. Soon as I step through the door, I take a full bottle of Jack from the cupboard and set myself up on the couch. Then, using the remote, I switch on the TV and flick on the DVD that's permanently in the player.

"Suprisssee. It's not Scarface....." Carly's beautiful face fills the screen, and that constant pain in my heart scrapes even deeper.

We were happy. She was fucking happy. That smile, and the color in those cheeks is what I lived for. My wife was perfect.

I knock the bottle back and rewind it back to the start again.

“Suprisssee. It’s not Scarface...” The vision of her blurs through my tears, and I wait for it to come. The antidote to all my pain...

Anger.

It seethes under my skin and crawls into my veins. It makes me forget any traces of the man I used to be, the man who loved with all his heart and lost all the good from his soul.

I rewind again, and study every single inch of her flawless skin, then standing up, I reach out and touch the screen with my fingers. It’s been so long, I’ve forgotten what it feels like. I don’t hear her laugh in my head, anymore. Her clothes that remain in her wardrobe are losing her scent, and the only reminder my heart’s got that it ever loved, is the pain it’s struck with when I think of her.

Some nights I torture myself, wondering what those last moments of her life were like. Did she regret me, in them? Did she regret all we’d done and how we loved each other?

“*Cunt!*” I yell at the wall he fucked her against, tossing my bottle at it when the rage inside me spills over the edge. I drop to the floor and press my head back against the beam that holds up the ceiling, wishing this whole damn place would fall down around me.

“I failed you.” I talk to her as if she were here in front of me, and resting my elbows on my knees, I bury my head between my hands and tear at my hair. I wanna rip the thoughts outta my head. Sometimes they make me wonder who the fuck I am.

I loved Carly with every bone in my body and every ache of my heart, but there are times like this one, when I wish I’d

never met her.

Sometimes, I wish I didn't have our memories because they fucking hurt. And then, I feel disgusted with myself because those memories are all we fucking have, to show for what we were.

I close my eyes, and I see her smiling. I feel her fingertips brush the hair on my jaw, and when I snatch my hand up to hold her there, there's nothing but fucking air and the space she's left me with.

It builds the anger back up inside me until all I see is *him*.

I came close to my brother today, the closest I've been since he took her from me, and he ran like a fucking coward. I *will* find him, I *will* kill him, but then I wonder, what the fuck I'm gonna live for?

I wake up on the couch with an empty bottle of vodka in my hand and a half-smoked blunt stuck to the side of my face.

The TV is fuzzy, and so's my damn head. I head to the sink for a glass of water and throw some on my face to wake myself up.

When I pick up my cell, I see a few missed calls from Squealer, and a message from him, telling me to meet him at his old lady's office. I can only suspect this has something to do with Chop. So, without bothering to shower, I pick up my bike keys and rush out the door. I ride into town and park my bike up outside the office, before I march through the glass doors. Alex is sitting behind her desk, and Squealer is cradling one of his boys on the leather armchair in the waiting area.

“Took ya time,” he stops blowing raspberries at his kid, to call me out.

“It’s not even nine am,” I remind him, wishing my head would stop fucking banging.

“Yeah, well, some of us are early starters these days,” he raises his eyebrows and gets back to cooing over his kid.

“I picked this up late, last night, using Maddy’s software,” Alex wastes no time getting to her point, and when I move behind her to look at the screen, I see my brother waiting in line at what looks like a gas station.

“This was taken a mile away from the Bastard’s compound in Texas. Prez was right. He headed straight there.” The leather cut he’s wearing, confirms that he’s one of them now.

“Fucking Bastard,” I utter, shaking my head at the screen.

“Literally,” Squealer moves to stand beside me, rocking his baby in his arms and as happy as I am for him, it hurts a little.

“Well, we know where to find him. We just gotta figure out how to go about it. The Bastards got numbers in Texas. That’s not a battle, it’s an outright war.”

Squeal doesn’t seem to be getting the same kick he usually does out of the prospect of that fact, and I can only guess it has everything to do with the tiny person he’s holding in his arms, and his brother who’s sleeping in the stroller next to Alex.

“No one else is getting hurt. And there ain’t gonna be no war. We’ll flush him out.”

The office door opens, and when I see the girl that steps through it, an imaginary fist slams straight into my chest.

I'd recognize that cute, button nose and those big eyes anywhere.

"Skid," she greets me surprisingly warmly, and I immediately march toward her, grabbing her arm and dragging her outside.

"What the fuck are *you* doing here?" I scold her, as she tries to struggle out of my grip.

It's been some years since I last saw her, and she's grown a hell of a lot, but she's still far too young and far too innocent to be hanging around here.

"I'm working."

"Working? What are you talking about working? You should be at school."

"I'm nineteen, now. I left school last summer," she tilts her head at me cleverly, proving how fast time can go. The last time I saw her, I swear she was climbing a fucking tree.

"Well, there ain't no work for you here," I tell her firmly.

"Um, yeah, there is. I'm working for Alex and Maddy. I'm taking care of the babies, during office hours." I stare at her blankly. This can't be happening. She can't fucking *be* here.

"Now, if you would kindly let me get to work.." She tugs her arm to try to free it from my hand, and I release her from my grip when I realize how hard I've been squeezing.

"You need to leave here. Tell them you made a mistake. This ain't the place for you,"

"See, that's where you're wrong, Skid. I made no mistake. This is exactly where I need to be." She barges past me and heads for the door, and when I drag her back, that stubborn look on her face is so familiar, it hurts to look at.

“What do you mean by that? Jasmine. I’m being serious. You need to go home,”

Her eyes glance up at the sign above the door.

MANITOU INVESTIGATIONS

“Good place to start an investigation, don’t you think?” She smiles at me cleverly, before yanking herself free again and heading inside. I watch her take the baby out of Squealer’s arms, through the window, and when he heads straight out to join me, he has a confused look on his face.

“Dude, what was that all about?” He lights himself a smoke. “I’m warning you now, if you’re planning on sticking it into the babysitter, I wouldn’t. Alex loves her, she’s great with the kids, and I don’t think Alex would stop at killing you, if you upset her.”

“I sure ain’t planning on sticking it in her,” I assure him, continuing to watch the girl through the glass.

“Then what’s the story? You look like you’ve seen a fucking ghost,” he blows out a long stream of smoke.

“She’s Carly’s little sister.” The words I speak cause his mouth to drop open. “And I gotta feeling she knows her sister didn’t kill herself.”



ONE WEEK LATER

“Will you all stop making such a fuss?” Jess manages to get through everyone and takes a seat on one of the leather couches, while Maddy and her mom flap around him.

“I really think we should have gone straight home and put you to bed,” Mads doesn’t look impressed.

“I’ve spent a whole damn week in bed. I want a beer, and I wanna listen to these jerks talk their shit.” VP looks up at her and flashes a grin that has her heading to the bar to grab him one.

“Good to have you home,” I tell him.

“Good to *be* home,” he makes a relieved sigh back at me, and when Maddy returns with a bottle in her hand, he lifts up the arm he hasn’t got in a sling and wraps it around her waist.

“You know, I could get used to this ‘being waited on’ thing,”

“Well, don’t. As soon as you’ve recovered, things are going back to normal,” she smiles.

I wish I could believe that was true, but whatever happened to Maddy down in that basement with Chop, is gonna stick with her. She’s not coping too well. I’ve seen a change in her, and although it’ll take some time and some fight, I know she’ll get through it.

Jessie, however, is so hellbent on catching Chop and nailing him to the wall, I don’t think he’s gonna let up. On the outside, he’s smiling, but I know that it’s all for her. He’s mad and frustrated, and I know that injury of his ain’t gonna hold him back for much longer.

“How’s he dealing?” Jess tips his chin over toward the bar, where Storm is talking with his sister, Riley.

“Better, he’s learning, and the girls are helping him,” I assure Jess, as I take a seat beside him.

“We’re all pitching in. It can’t be easy for him. We could ask Jasmine to take care of Faith at the office, too, if he needs it.” Maddy suggests.

“Yeah, about her. She gonna be a problem?” Jess is talking to me, but it’s his old lady who answers his question.

“No, she’s not.” She sounds defensive, probably because she knows how much Skid disapproves of the girl working for them.

“She’s perfect for the job, and she’s not here to cause trouble. I spoke to her about it.”

“Can’t be easy for him though, darlin’. Skid had to tell that family a lot of lies, and all of them were for their own good.” Jessie points out.

“Yeah, well, me and Skid have come to an agreement, I keep her away from the club, and she gets to keep her job.” Maddy smiles, looking pleased with herself before she kisses Jessie’s cheek and heads off to join the girls.

“You good with this?” Jess looks at me.

“Jessie, being honest, that girl’s the least of our worries. Ella likes her too, and you know how those girls get when they decide to stick together. We pick our battles, and that ain’t one we want.”

Jess nods his head in agreement, before taking a cigarette from his cut and lighting it up.

The room falls silent when the doors open, and all eyes go to the stranger who walks through them.

“Jimmer Carson?” The tall, rugged-looking guy stares right at me, and Jessie automatically gets on his feet and places himself in front of me.

“Who’s asking?” He walks toward the guy who, instead of looking threatened, lifts the Stetson off his head as a greeting.

“Brax, you better hold your old lady back. We got a real cowboy in the saloon!” Squealer calls out, before I stand up and step forward. You gotta have some brass balls to step into my clubhouse without an invitation, but the closer I get, the more I sense that I know this man.

“You can stand down. I ain’t here to cause any trouble,” he places the hat back on his head and looks past Jessie, directly at me.

“I don’t expect you to recognise me, Uncle Jimmer. It’s been a while,” he confirms all my suspicions. Those dark eyes and the harshness in his expression make it unmistakable. This man is a Carson. He ain’t just dressed like a cowboy—he *is* a fucking cowboy. Now, I just gotta figure what the fuck he’s doing here.

“Which one are ya?” I place my hand on Jessie’s shoulder to stand him down.

“Garrett.” He introduces himself, and I nod my head slowly in response.

I ain’t seen my nephew since he was two years old, but I’ve heard, over the years, from my contact in Montana that he’s a Carson, through and through.

“Mitch send ya?” I ask, ignoring the clueless look on everyone’s face as they stare between us both.

“No, I came here off my own back.” He gives nothing away with his answer, so I figure we should take this somewhere more private.

“You wanna step into my office?” I gesture toward the door he just came through.

“Prez?” I don’t know if Jessie is expectant of some answers or if he’s thinking I need protection, but I shake my head at him. I’ll explain myself later.

Garrett nods and follows me out the doors, and I lead him through to the members-only bar.

“So, what can I do for you?” I get behind the bar and grab two glasses and a bottle of Jack. I’m sure he’s more used to vintage, single malts, but this will have to do.

“I wanna take back, what my father lost.” He has a look of determination on his face, that backs up everything Mitch has told me about him.

When I left my hometown to come here and start up this club, I left a lot behind me. My family ran Fork River, much like we run Manitou Springs. But my brother was too pigheaded to understand that, in order to do that, you gotta be a little ruthless. You can’t play by the rules of someone else’s game, you gotta write your own, and you certainly can’t abide by the law.

It’s the reason I left, and I’m pretty certain it’s the reason I got his son sitting in front of me, now.

“I got men, good men that I trust,” Garrett takes the shot I pour for him and knocks it back.

“Mitch tells me you brought back the brand.” For years, my father, just like his before him, ran his ranch through corruption. The men who worked beside him, to protect our

family legacy, wore the ranch's brand as a symbol of their loyalty. But, as soon as my brother took over, all that crumbled. He saw no value in the outlaws and damned men, who put their lives on the line for our family and reputation. He sought his respect through politics.

The poor bastard never stood a chance.

"Mitch talks too much," Garrett sniggers back at me.

"He's proud, that's why." I grew up with Mitch. He was always more of a brother to me than Bill. He keeps in touch and is always singing this boy's praises, and telling me how alike we are. He's always had faith that my nephew would carry on the Carson name in the way my pa would've wanted, and the fact he's here today, not too proud to ask for my help, might mean Mitch's prayers have been answered.

"So, what do you want from me?" I refill our glasses and wait for him to get to the nitty-gritty.

"I want an ally, someone I know I can trust, when the time comes."

"And you came to me?" I scoff a laugh at him.

"If you can't trust family, who can ya?" He shrugs his shoulders and shows no fear.

"Your pa would tell ya different."

"My pa ain't here—I am." He narrows his eyes and holds my stare, and reminds me a lot of myself when I was his age.

"I know you didn't walk away from the ranch because you didn't care. Grandpa talked about you a lot, and Mitch is always telling his stories. We share the same family history, and we got the same blood running through our veins."

“You’re right about that, but it still doesn’t explain why you’re here.” I sit back in my chair.

“I got some wolves at my door, and I’m prepared to do whatever it takes, to protect what our family fought so hard to build. I won’t be the Carson that fails, and if that means I have to ask for some help, so be it.” He swallows his whiskey and tenses his jaw while he waits for my response.

“It’s been a long time. My brothers here don’t even know that part of me exists.” Saying it out loud makes me feel ashamed about it.

“And yet, the Dirty Dozen was built from it,” Garrett points out, proving he’d done his homework.

“The day I founded this club, was the day I left all that behind. Yeah, some branded men followed, but only because they had your grandpa’s blessing. We’ve never looked back, only forward.” I think back to how supportive my pa was, when I told him I wanted to leave. He already knew the place was failing and that me leaving was gonna do it no favors, but he saw what was best for me, and not only did he let me go, but he gave me a purpose. I owe him this.

“I’ll help ya,” I tell him, hoping I’m not gonna regret this, and already wondering how I’m gonna tell Ella that there’s a whole other family that she never knew existed.

It was never something I intended to keep from her. It just never seemed relevant.

“But before you make your deal with the devil, you should know that I got some wolves on my doorstep, too. And if you’re an ally of this club, I’ll expect to call in some favors of my own.”

“I think I already got a couple of those favors back on my ranch.” The smirk on Garrett’s face shows he ain’t clueless, and when he holds his hand out for mine, I grip it tight and shake it.

I pour us another drink to seal the deal and then ask a question that’s been bothering me.

“You came all this way, just to ask for help?” I stare across the table, trying to make him out.

“I remember Grandpa always said, if you’re man enough to ask for a favor, you should be man enough to face the man you’re asking.” I nod and smile when I remember him saying those exact words to me.

“It’s a wicked world, and I may be a bad man in it, but I’m told by a man I trust, that me and you share a lot of the same morals. There ain’t no need for us to be strangers. If you need me, that’s the number you call.”

He places his card on the table, and when I see the image of a cow skull bearing the Carson Ranch brand, I smile to myself at its similarity to the patch on my back.

Garrett stands from his chair, and as I look up at him, I can’t help thinking Pa would be proud.

“Whatever it takes,” I throw some more of my Pa’s words at him. Hank Carson wasn’t just a feared man, he was a wise one, and nothing makes sense about the way he went out.

“Whatever it takes.” Garrett smiles and nods his head back at me. Those are the words Pa always spoke before we did whatever it was we had to do, to protect the family. It seems fitting to part on them. Garrett lifts his hat before heading out the door, and I gotta sense that I’ll be seeing him again, real soon.

I take another shot of whiskey and absorb everything that just happened. It's proof that the past will always catch up with ya eventually, and as I toast my glass at the ceiling, I hope my pa's watching and seeing for himself that deep inside, there's still a little bit of him left, inside me.

I head back to the barroom, and as soon as Jessie sees me, he steps away from his welcome home party and leads me into the corner.

“What the fuck was that all about?” he asks under his breath. “A nephew? I've never heard you mention any family, other than Vex.”

“I haven't seen him since he was two years old. It seemed irrelevant.” I make out it's no big deal, but I know I'll have to bring this to the table. Today just ain't the day for it.

“Well, is it relevant now?” Jessie looks concerned—considering what he's been through, I understand why.

“It may be. He came here to check if he can rely on us if he needs to, and I told him he could, because he's family.”

I explain it in simple terms because that's exactly what it is. Simple.

Garrett is trying to repair damage that's been done, and I may not like to admit it, but I played my part in causing that damage. The least I can do is help fix it.

Jessie makes no attempt to argue, and I know I'll have to offer him a better explanation than the one I have. But right now, we have a different matter to attend to.

“Is everyone ready?” I ask, and he nods back at me with a grin. “Let's take 'em to church, then.” I wink, looking over to the bar and flicking my head at the door, so my club brothers know to follow me out.

We leave the women and kids in the barroom and make our way over to the chapel, where we hold all our meetings. Tawk, Hayden and Storm wait outside as we all take our seats and Nyx, being the last one in, closes the door.

“We all know what we’re here to do, we made the vote, and it was unanimous. It’s time.” I check around the table, and when everyone’s nodded their head, I slam down the gavel.

“Bring him in, ” I tell Thorne, who’s sitting closest to the door, and he does as I order, calling Storm in and closing the door after him.

If the kid’s nervous, he ain’t showing it. He’s been through a lot, and he’s about to go through a whole lot more now he’s got that little girl to look after. And we’re about to prove to him that he ain’t gonna do it alone.

“Prez, before you start, I know I need to apologize. I’m still trying to figure shit out, and I lost my head over it all. I said, and did, some pretty shitty things. But I’m owning it. It’s gonna take some time, some patience and some help,” his eyes switch between Troj and Thorne, whose old ladies have both been at his side the past week.

“We didn’t call you in here to hear your apologies,” I tell him, keeping the sternness on my face.

“You can’t kick me out.” He blurts the words out and shakes his head. “I know being a single dad is gonna make things harder for me, and I know you got two guys out there that deserve their Prospect positions, but I’ll work twice as hard. I fucking need this.” I can see just how much, from the tremor in his voice and the fear in his bright, blue eyes. It’ll be hard for him to show his vulnerability like this. So, I put him out of his misery.

“I gotta feeling you need this, a lot more.” I nod my head to Brax, who stands up from the table holding Storm’s new cut in his hands, and I see the pride on his face as he steps behind him and tugs the Prospect’s cut off his shoulders.

Storm stares back at me, looking shocked as hell, as Brax replaces it with his new one.

“Welcome to the club, kid,” I smile, feeling a little proud, myself. He’s worked hard, he’s shown his worth, and although it took him a little time, he stepped up when it was time for him to be a man.

“Is this for real?” he checks, looking at Squealer. “Because if this is your idea of a joke or a prank...”

“It’s real.” Brax grips his shoulder. “We all voted a few days ago, just wanted to wait till VP was home before we made it official.”

I watch Storm’s chest sag with relief, and the emotion he shows when he turns around and hugs the man who’s been his sponsor, confirms we all made the right choice.

“Take ya seat.” I feel a lump wedge in my throat when I look at the empty chair around the table. This is a moment we all knew was coming, but that don’t make it any easier.

Storm shocks us all when he steps away from the table and picks up one of the chairs that’s propped against the wall. He places it between Thorne’s seat and the one that used to be occupied by Tac.

“I think I’ll take this one, if that’s okay with you guys.”

I smile him a sad smile, and Nyx shows his appreciation with a proud nod of his head.

I take a look around the table at my brothers and feel a swell of pride, myself. Whatever brought us together doesn't matter. It's what keeps us here, and what we're fighting for, that counts

The future may be unpredictable, we got battles coming at us from all angles, but there's one thing that we can be sure of.

We fall down.

We get back up.

We do it together... which means, we're never down for long.

Follow Garret and The Corrupt Cowboys Here:

Preorder link-

[Off Limits](#)

Corrupt Cowboys Book 1

NEXT IN THE DIRTY SOULS MC SERIES

Preorder Link-

[Ruined Soul](#) (Coming April 2023)

MORE FROM THE DIRTY SOULS

0.5. [Bound Soul](#) (New Release Freebie)

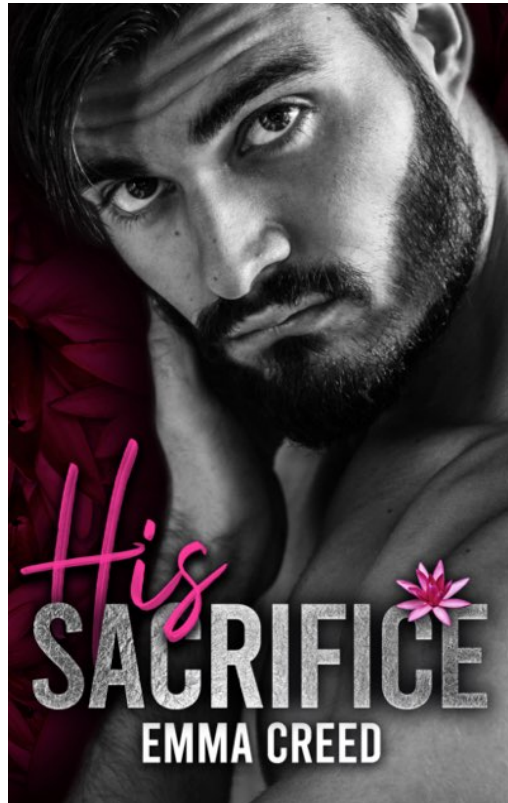
1. [Lost Soul](#)
2. [Reckless Soul](#)
3. [Vengeful Soul](#)
4. [Damaged Soul](#)
5. [Forbidden Soul](#)
6. [Untamed Soul](#)
7. [Tortured Soul](#)
8. [Stolen Soul](#)
9. [Captivated Soul](#)
10. [Abandoned Soul](#)

HIS CAPTIVE



[Buy His Captive](#)

HIS SACRIFICE



[Buy His Sacrifice](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Come find/stalk me on the following social media platforms.

[Newsletter](#)

[Facebook Group](#)

[Facebook Page](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Goodreads](#)

[Bookbub](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always I have to thank my incredible beta team Andrea, Angela, Ellen and Jessica for all their excellent feedback. You girls really know these guys now and I love how you love them, the way I do.

Another huge thank you goes out to Elizabeth and Sophie, for being my final eyes.

To The Soul Sisters (Emma Creed's Dirty Souls). You are an incredible bunch who endlessly support each other, as well as me. And for that, I'm so grateful to each and everyone of you.

To Yvette and Kerry, for all your hard work and being so easy to work with..

And to Kate, Apryle, Lucy, Amo and Jess. The people who, these last few months, have been so busy for me. I've been writing constantly and the fact you all still want to be my friend astounds me.

To my crazy tribe at home. I'm so proud of the amazing humans you are growing into.

And finally to Rob, who is undoubtedly the most understanding husband in the world. Thank you for putting up with me, for understanding and offering endless support. I love you all x

Em x